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CAPTAIN CRISP THE MAN WITH A RECORD.



"RUN, TOM—RUN FOR COVER, WHILE I SHOOT THE UGLY BRUTE!"
"YOU RUN! I'M ALL RIGHT, UNLESS THIS HANDLE—PULLS OUT!"

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "A ROYAL FLUSH," "OLD '49,"
"NOR' WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LASS THAT LOVED A PALADIN.

"REGRET it, Thomas? Regret the change from the stiff, frigid formality which hedged us in from all contact with any outside of our poor, petty, milk-and-water, prunes and prisms circle which they called OUR WORLD? No, indeed!" and Orabel Hilliard drew her queenly figure up to its proudest height as she glanced around her with sparkling eyes, her thin nostrils quivering with a proud pleasure.

"I didn't know," meekly observed Thomas, doing his best to imitate the pose, for which nature had so poorly fitted him. "It seems an awful rough life for a lady to lead. And one brought up so delicately as you, Ora!"

"A life my father led before me—the life which I expect to lead for the future—unless—"

"Unless the happy coming man decides differently," supplemented Tom Allen, with a rueful look in his honest blue eyes, as they caught the dreamy, far-away look, which came so abruptly into the glorious orbs of his queenly companion.

The tinge of color deepened slightly on those smooth cheeks, and the long lashes trembled and

partly shaded the light of those dark eyes, but the tones were steady as before.

"That of course, when he does come."

"Lord send he trips up and breaks his blessed neck before he sets foot on Good Enough Ranch!" muttered Tom Allen, with sudden emphasis, and an expression upon his fat, rosy face that would have been a revelation to any maiden less romantic and preoccupied than Orabel Hilliard was at that precise moment.

"When the master comes, his wishes will be paramount, of course. If he says this life is unsuitable for me, so be it. And yet," her dark eyes roving slowly, almost lovingly over the wide expanse of gently rolling plain, dotted here and there with small clumps of timber, "one might well regret the going back to that cold, artificial life! There, one is ever in the stocks; here, one breathes in freedom with each expansion of one's lungs. No care, no trouble—"

"Not for you, Queen Ora!" interrupted Tom, with a monstrous sigh that caused his fat, roly-poly form to quiver in the saddle. "As for me, I've suffered more torments since coming here than ever mortal man bore before! Signed, sealed and sworn to—amen!"

There was more than customary earnestness in his tones, and Orabel Hilliard turned a wondering look upon him. The fat face glowed more vividly, and the smooth-shorn lip quivered just a trifle, but the honest eyes met her gaze without flinching.

"It's gospel truth, Ora, though I don't suppose you'll believe it. I've suffered enough to turn any man's hair whiter than snow! But I'm not a man. I'm hardly even a human creature. I'm only a poor, miserable, no 'count roll of fat done up in tweed, without a single nerve, scrap of sentiment or ghost of a heart!"

"A vile slander, Tom!" and one daintily-gloved hand dropped on his shoulder as those glorious black eyes, bright and lustrous as those of a fawn, gazed laughingly into his. "A heart bigger than all the rest that goes to make up the sum of Thomas Allen. A heart that is truer than gold, backed up by a hand that is honest as day, and a—"

"Shape that makes him a laughing stock in a crowd!" almost bitterly interposed the young man.

His fair companion glanced slowly over the said figure, the laughing light deepening in her eyes, a smile playing about her red lips.

A jolly, likable figure, if not one to be highly commended for its elegance, and one that had quite satisfied Thomas Allen until within the past few months. Rotund, fuller about the equator than at either pole, requiring a goodly quantity of cloth to encircle what in courtesy must be called his waist; a figure which one naturally couples with good-humor, kindness and equability.

"Didn't I say so?" and Tom nodded with a vigor that tipped his hat over his reproachful eyes, and was only saved from falling to the ground by a vigorous effort. "You're laughing at it now, Ora! And I've starved myself until I actually feel faint from hunger! I've tried to walk, run, work it down to respectable size, until I'd ought to have muscles tempered equal to those of a prize-fighter or a professional pedestrian. Instead—fat, all fat!"

"Which not one of all your friends, Tom, would have changed in a single respect," earnestly uttered Orabel, her gloved hand almost caressingly patting his arm, her black eyes glowing kindly and sympathetically. "You are just perfect as you are."

Allen laughed, but the sounds were plainly forced.

"So you say, Ora, but—is it the figure of one whom you would select from all others as that of a husband?"

The dark eyes opened widely, the gloved hand fell away from his arm, surprise written upon every feature. Then, with a soft, low laugh Orabel looked far off over the plain, the color coming and going in her cheeks.

She did not see the gray shade that came over the face of her companion, did not notice the pained look that came into his honest eyes, the tightening of those full lips. For the moment it seemed as though she had forgotten his very existence, and the words that fell softly from her lips seemed addressed to vacancy rather than to the man who sat his horse beside her.

"In my dreams have I seen him! Tall, erect, stately without the suspicion of stiffness—a figure such as came to the dreams of the sculptor before he created the Apollo Belvedere! A face that the Archangel—"

A half-stifled groan from Tom Allen checked her dreamy reverie, and flashing vividly, Orabel turned toward her companion.

"Did you speak, Thomas?"

"I didn't, but I'm going to," was the hasty response. "Going to have it out though it kills me—though it blots out my last poor, foolish hope! In a moment, Orabel. Just now—hadn't we better ride on a bit further?"

Tom Allen began hold enough, but as it had happened so many times before, his courage oozed out at his fingers' ends when he thought of putting all to the test. He wanted to catch breath. To gather up his strength for the blow which, even

in his lovesickness, he knew must surely follow such a speaking out.

Strange as it may appear, Orabel Hilliard never suspected the truth which was so clear to all about her, ever since Thomas Allen and his sister Mary had come to pay their long-promised visit to Good Enough Ranch. Even now, she rode quietly on beside the man who was over head and ears in love with her, who would have died for her sake had the occasion ever arisen, without so much as even suspecting his sentiments.

She was a peculiar girl in some respects, this heroine of ours, but all of the Hilliards were peculiar, people said, and she came honestly by it. Most peculiar of all, they would have told you, was old Morris Hilliard, once a flourishing merchant in the city of Boston, but at the time of his death a prosperous cattle-raiser of Texas.

When Morris Hilliard left Boston to retrieve his fortunes, he left his two children behind him, Eugene and Orabel, the one twelve and the other eight years of age. From that time the children rarely heard from their father, and still more rarely saw him in the flesh. He was rapidly recovering his fortune, he gave them to understand, but they were far better off in Boston than they would be with him where his business interests called him.

As the years passed on, Eugene was placed in a bank, and Orabel was given the best education that money could command. Letters came more frequently from Morris Hilliard, and in them he began to plan for their future life together in the new land where he had retrieved his losses. But fate decreed that these rosy-hued plans should be carried out only in part, for Morris Hilliard died before uttering the word that would have brought his children to his side.

Though the contrary would naturally appear to be the most likely, Orabel felt the loss of her father even more deeply than would have been the case had they never been separated. Of a peculiar, dreamy, almost mystical nature, she had created an ideal far beyond the reality, and those last letters from him to her, containing much that was to influence her future life, were cherished and pored over for hours and hours at a time. To her the wishes and hopes those letters contained became commands the most solemn, and she lived only to carry them out as far as lay in her power.

Morris Hilliard died suddenly, and was in his grave long before word could reach his children. That word came from an intimate friend of the ranchman, Hurley Burr by name, and he visited Boston in person to see that the wishes of his friend were carried out.

In accordance therewith, Eugene and Orabel left Boston and journeyed with Hurley Burr to the "Good Enough Ranch," where we now find them, just on the eve of strange and curious adventures.

For the better part of a year they had lived at the ranch, and Orabel Hilliard was so enthusiastic in her praises of the life and surroundings in her letters to a bosom companion of her school-life, that Mary Allen, under the escort of her brother Thomas, came to spend the summer months with them.

Poor Tom! Better for him, perhaps, had he consulted his natural indolence more closely, and remained in his beloved Boston, for, before he had been at Good Enough Ranch a single week, he knew that he had met his fate in Orabel Hilliard.

He was far from being a fool, and fought manfully against his rash infatuation, for reason told him that naught but disappointment and misery could come of it. He was quite shrewd enough to read the romantic, sentimental nature aright. He knew that he could almost as easily scale the heavens as to win the love of Orabel. But the malicious little god had stung him far too keenly for reason alone to heal the wound, and the more Tom told himself he was an ass for even dreaming of such supreme bliss, the more he kept on longing and reaching out for the unattainable.

Orabel was singularly blind in some respects, for a modern young lady. Plain as were the devotions of her fat lover to all others, any such idea never once entered her mind. Had it done so, she would have banished it as worse than ridiculous. She fully appreciated Tom as a kindly, honest, agreeable friend and companion; but lover!

And so she wounded the poor fellow scores and scores of times until his heart shed tears of blood, yet so unconsciously did she speed the darts that Tom loved her more for the pain she gave him.

As he so often told himself when wrestling savagely with his mad passion, his was not a face nor figure to charm a romantic girl like Orabel, herself so brilliantly, proudly beautiful. And never before had she seemed so lovely to poor Tom as when he rode silently by her side over the prairie that afternoon.

Rather above the average of her sex in height, Orabel Hilliard was as near perfection in face and figure as one could find in a year's search after a model for Diana, modernized.

It is not easy to select words which would convey even a dim shadow of her real appearance,

just then, with that pensive smile on her face, that far-away look in her lustrous black eyes. The most skillful word-painter might consume pages in the attempt, yet fall far short of his ambition in the end.

Tall, queenly in carriage, her figure perfectly rounded, each curve and bend admirably displayed by her neatly fitting habit of black with trimmings of old gold. Her eyes and hair black as jet. Her complexion clear and just tinged with olive. Her lips red, arching, involuntarily awakening thoughts of kissing in those who saw them. Her hands and feet small and shapely. Her voice clear, changing often but always musical. This must suffice.

About her trim waist was a belt of stamped leather, supporting a pair of small but serviceable revolvers—strange ornaments for one who might have been set down in Prospect Park on a gala day without receiving aught but praise!

"A husband—yes," she said, as though continuing a subject that had already been partly discussed in her own mind. "It is the last, finishing touch to a woman's life, and of course I have thought of the matter more than once. To you, Tom," and she laughed softly as she turned and gently touched his arm with the tip of her whip, "I don't mind making the admission—you seem almost like my second self!"

Tom did not seem sufficiently grateful for this kindness. His light brows contracted, his red lips pursed themselves, and his fat hand gripped the bridle-rein as though he had that visionary husband by the throat with his knees planted upon his heaving chest.

"It is so nice to have some one in whom you can confide, knowing that your silliest, most foolish thoughts will not be laughed at. And, somehow, I feel in an unusually confiding mood to-day! I want to talk—to pour out my whole soul! I must! May I, Tom, dear?"

Again she turned toward him, coaxingly, half tearfully, her eyes seeming to moisten as they shyly met his gaze.

What could the poor fellow do? Nothing but submit, though he knew that he was to be wounded again as he had so often been wounded before. There was an emotion in his voice that ought to have warned her, but just then Orabel was even blinder than usual, and again gazing far away over the gently rolling plain, she uttered:

"Like all other girls, I suppose, I have dreamed a dream in which there was a husband and a wife and a cozy little home for them both! And like them, I have formed my ideal. You will not be too awfully shocked, Tom, dear?"

If so, he wouldn't show it. It was but a crumb to a starving man, and that crumb steeped in poison, but with that coaxing voice, that appealing look in those dark eyes, Tom Allen would have as soon denied his Savior as denied her the privilege.

"Not a bit of it, Ora," he said, bravely, adding with a husky little laugh: "But don't look at me too often, or my puny form will knock all the romance out of your pretty little fancies!"

How slight a chance he had of ever winning more than a calm, sisterly sort of affection from her, was shown by the fact that she allowed this remark to pass without notice, polite though she ordinarily was.

"Tall, stately, handsome as a god, of course, Tom," she resumed, with a low, soft laugh, her eyes again on vacancy, her face gently suffused, the reins lying unheeded as her hands clasped on her lap. "I am like all other girls in that respect, but there the similitude ceases. They are generally satisfied with that, but I crave and must have more! My ideal is a hero—a hero in spite of himself!"

"Not a knight-errant after the olden fashion, Tom, but one of modern days. Not one who kneels at the feet of woman and places her foot upon his neck. Not one who flies at their slightest nod and beck, content to serve; but a man in every respect—a Man With a Record! A man to command, not obey. A man who leads, instead of following. A man for whose sake I could resign my own will, my own fancies, my very life, should he ask it, and never once pause to count the cost!"

"And in return for all this, I would only ask his love—his whole heart. He should think me perfect, of course, or as perfect as a weak woman ever becomes. He should pet and caress me in his hours of relaxation, but he should never become maudlin or fawning. I would hate him then, I know! He must rule me firmly, yet kindly. In one word, he must be my master, through love, as I would become his slave through the same sentiment."

She paused short as a groan broke from the lips of her companion, and it was a pitiful attempt at a smile that Tom Allen met her wondering look. Despite himself there was a tinge of gruffness in his voice as he spoke:

"The woods are full of them, of course! You'll never meet your paragon, Orabel!"

"Then I'll never marry, Tom!" she decisively cried.

"I wish I could think it!" he ejaculated, with desperate courage. "Then I'd know if I couldn't have you, no one else would!"

"Tom!" and Orabel stared into his face with wide-eyed wonder.

Tom gulped down something that was almost choking him, and facing the girl with the courage of desperation, he hurriedly uttered:

"It had to come some time, Ora, and as well now as another. It's the pitiful truth, though I don't wonder much at your amazement. It is awfully cheeky in me, isn't it?"

"I don't understand you, Tom!"

"Why should you, Ora, when you have, I believe, given me credit for at least a modicum of sense, whatever else I may have lacked? But I'll make it clear enough for you, never fear! And in one breath—Orabel Hilliard, I love you with all my heart and soul!"

She gazed steadily into his flushed face with wondering eyes, apparently suspecting an attempt at mystification. But, he was plainly in desperate earnest. No one who looked into his face, into his eyes, could doubt that earnestness. And yet, there was something so supremely ridiculous in the sudden transformation—to her—from a commonplace friend into that of an ardent lover, that she could not refrain from bursting into a hearty laugh, though she stifled this as soon as she could.

"Didn't I say so?" muttered Tom, with a poor pretense at a laugh. "Didn't I know you would think I'd gone mad? But all the same, Ora, it is terrible earnest with me. I mean it all. I love you—have loved you from the day I first saw your face. And it is as pure, earnest love as ever man felt for woman, despite my ridiculous figure and homely face. If I haven't the shape of a model lover, I have the heart. And though you may trample that heart under your feet in the dust, Ora, it is all yours—every throb and every pulsation, yours!"

"I know, Tom," and the color came back into her momentarily blanched face again, as her soft, musical laugh bubbled forth. "You are paying me back in my own coin. I dreamed a dream, and you have capped the climax with another!"

"A dream, of course. I knew that, from the first," muttered Tom, turning his face away the better to crowd down that ugly choking in his throat.

"And silly as you thought mine, Tom, yours is still more supremely ridiculous," she laughed, her gaze wandering far off over the plain, all unconscious how bitterly her words were stinging that true heart. "Why, Tom, supposing you had been in earnest, I'd just as soon think of marrying your sister Mary as marrying you!"

"Supposing, you say, Orabel," and there was something in his low, unsteady tones that brought back her gaze and drove the color from her cheeks again. "God help me! it is the truth, girl! I do love you. Even knowing that you can give me only one answer, I do ask you to become my wife. You can do no worse than refuse me, and perhaps then I'll have manhood enough to accept my fate and go away and try to live it down."

"Tom, you surely don't mean it?" gravely asked Orabel, one hand gently resting on his arm.

He bent his head and touched his lips to the gloved hand before she could divine his intention. He smiled bitterly as she swiftly withdrew the member, but there was no anger in his voice as he spoke again:

"Let that tell you, Orabel. Like the knight-errant you spoke of, I would ask nothing better than to be the slave of your lightest whim. I would be proud to feel your foot upon my neck. I would be content to follow where you led. I would die for one fair word from your lips."

Somehow this did not sound so extravagant, coming in those husky, agitated tones. Somehow Orabel could not laugh. She saw how terribly in earnest the poor fellow was, and her heart ached with pity—not love such as he yearned for, poor fellow!

Her tones were soft and grave and full of pity as she spoke:

"Tom, I am sorry for this—more sorry than words can tell. I never once dreamed of such a thing happening."

"Of course not, Ora, how should you?" he interposed, with a poor attempt at smiling. "A man with my face and figure has no business to be in love, least of all with an angel such as—"

A gloved hand gently tapped his lips and cut the speech short.

"Far from being an angel, Tom, like you, silly, thoughtless. Come! let's forget the past few minutes, and continue the good, every day friends we have been since your arrival. Is it a bargain?"

"Is it so easy to forget, Orabel?" with a faint smile, his blue eyes frankly meeting her dark orbs. "You know it is not. You will never see me without remembering my folly. And I—well, I'm not ashamed to make free confession. I shall never forget that I loved and still love you, or that I asked you to be my wife. A question, by the way, to which you have given me no direct answer, plain as the inference is."

"Then why make me utter words that can only hurt, Tom? Hurt me in speaking and you in hearing them? Why not let it all pass by?"

"Look here, Ora," desperately, his eyes meeting hers without flinching a particle. "You can scorn it, but you can't kill the love I feel for you! It is part of my life, I verily believe! You can reject me, as you will, of course; never in my wildest moments have I ever doubted that! But you can't hinder me from loving you on and on while my life lasts. And in refusing to give me a positive answer, you only lend that madness fuel to keep it burning the more furiously."

"If I hesitated, Tom, it was through fear of hurting your feelings, not through any doubt as to the only answer I can give you," gravely but kindly uttered Orabel. "If you listened to my silly—silly, yet earnest—dream, you must know that. I drew my ideal for you then. I meant all I said, too."

"I like and respect you for your sterling good qualities. I could love you as I might love another brother, but in no other way. Pray let that suffice, since more is impossible. Let's continue good friends and comrades, as we have been for the past month. It has been very pleasant to me, and I think you have not found it so disagreeable?"

"It has been the sweetest bitterness I ever knew," grimly uttered Tom, shaking himself as though to cast off his burden of woe.

"Then let it come back again, and forget all—"

"I only wish I could," with a short, hard laugh. "I knew how foolish it was. I knew the ideal you had formed, and how you worshiped an imaginary hero. I even tried to pattern after that model—even I, fat and growing fatter every day!—but I reckon I was born under an unlucky star, for the more I tried, the more completely I failed. Every time I tried to show off, I made myself more ridiculous than even nature intended! Even now, when I thought perhaps I could at least awaken your pity—when I've been practicing eloquent appeals for two weeks past—I make a botch of it! And yet, Orabel," with a sudden wistfulness in tone and eyes, "if you could only try me! I love you like a hero, if I resemble one in no other respect."

But Orabel gravely shook her head, her voice firm and grave:

"It cannot be, Tom, though I could almost wish it might, for your sake. You know my ideal. I will marry a Man With a Record, or I will die a maid!"

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN WITH A RECORD.

THERE was a brief silence as their horses moved leisurely onward, and during it Orabel once more seemed to forget her surroundings, her companion, even the subject which had so unexpectedly risen between them. And Tom Allen, honest old soul! seemed determined to make the best of a bad matter, and as the moments passed by, his face grew more like its usual self, until one could almost have thought him an accepted instead of a rejected suitor.

"Well, one consolation, anyhow," he uttered, with a long breath. "You can't charge me with false pretenses after this. You'll know that if the visionary Man With a Record fails to put in an appearance, there is one honest heart that is waiting and watching with you, if not filled with just the same hopes. And if he should come, Ora—"

"He will. He is coming," softly breathed the romantic girl, her dark eyes glowing, her red lips parting, her cheeks suffused as she gazed far away over the plain, like one who actually beholds a long-looked for object. "Sure as fate he is coming, Tom!"

"If so, may he prove to be all your fancy paints him, Orabel," was the grave, earnest response. "May he be half-way worthy the prize that is waiting for him. But he won't! It stands to reason that he won't! You may fancy he's the very moral of your dream, but when you come to test his worth, Orabel, he'll turn out rankest dross! It's always so."

Orabel turned her face toward him, her eyes glowing, her red lips parting in a smile of perfect confidence.

"Too often, I grant you, Tom, but not this time. The test has already been applied, and my hero has come through it gold a thousand times refined!"

Tom stared at the fair enthusiast with something close akin to horror, and there was blank dismay in his tones as he spluttered:

"But I thought it was all a dream? I didn't know—Ora, girl, you haven't actually found this seventeenth wonder?"

"I know him and he knows me. We have met—in fancy if not in flesh. He knows—he must know that I am waiting for him, waiting his own good pleasure to come and claim his bride."

"I give it up!" groaned Tom, after staring open-mouthed into that rapt countenance. "If I didn't love you so well, Orabel, I'd be almost ready to take oath you had gone crazy! You talk like some silly girl whose brain has cracked over tenth-rate novels, where dukes and earls

and princes are plenty as bees in a clover-patch!"

Once more the romantic, dreamy girl was brought back to earth and every-day life by the practical lover, and her laugh rung out merrily as she noticed the look of puzzled despair upon his homely face.

"But it's all true, Tom, dear," she said as they rode slowly on together, "and I've not gone crazy over it, either! I'll tell you the whole story, if only to punish you for being so silly as to fall in love with one who has been bound to another almost from childhood."

Tom smiled grimly as he tried to fall into her light mood, but it was with only partial success. He had been hit hard, though so sure his chances were worse than naught, and even Orabel began to see this.

"You should have worn a placard stating 'hands off,' Ora, and then, perhaps, I mightn't have made such an idiot of myself. Yes, I would, too! I won't lie about it, even in jest. I had to love you, and I'll have to keep on loving you until you marry, or I pine and waste away to a shadow—admission, ten cents!"

She leaned over in her saddle and took one of his hands between hers, pressing it cordially, patting the fat back with one dainty hand. Her tones were very gentle, her eyes very lustrous and kind, as she said:

"If I have wronged you, Tom, I am awful sorry. Believe me, dear old friend, I never thought of such a thing. I have felt bound to another for so many years that I suppose I was careless; it seemed to me that everybody must know."

"That you were dreaming, Ora?" smiled Tom, bravely.

"A dream that seems more real than reality, Tom, even while you are laughing at my sentimental folly," smiled Orabel, her dark eyes again wandering out to the distance, though her tones were clear and natural, showing naught of the peculiar dreaminess which had haunted them before.

"I thought—if, indeed, I thought of it at all—that Mary had told you all about it. And yet, come to think, even she could have done no more than guess at the real truth. Though she was my second self while at school, not even she could enter fully into my dream-life!"

"And putting it all together, summing it up coolly and calmly, it is horridly stupid in me for not divining it all, Ora. That is what you mean to infer, of course?" laughed Tom, beginning to look and feel far more like his customary self.

After all, this is but a dream of a girl who had seen little of actual life. Perhaps in time she would laugh at it all. Perhaps—

That was as far as he dared go just then.

"Just that silly and visionary and unreasonable, Tom," with a low, mellow laugh. "And so you had ought to be thanking your lucky star—"

"When I find it, Ora!"

"Thank your lucky star that I fell in love with a shadow before meeting you, brother mine," placidly added Orabel.

"What a show I'd stand where shadows take the prizes!" muttered Tom, with a groan of disgusted resignation as he glanced down at his too great bulk.

"Every ounce of which is loved by your friends, Tom," quickly uttered Orabel, then adding: "But, shadows or reality, you must know all about it to-day, Tom. Then we'll shake hands, forget the past, begin a new page where not even the dimmest blot or shadow shall obscure the perfect light of friendship between you and me, Tom. Shall it be so?"

"I can try, Ora, but that's all I'll promise now. It isn't so easy to cure an attack of insanity, you know," he said, smiling faintly.

"I don't know just when it first began," said Orabel, with that dreamy, far-away look once more in her eyes. "It came in father's letters, but just when I first began to realize that I belonged to another, I cannot say. I only know it happened."

"You know father tried life in Mexico before he came here. It was something connected with mining, I believe, though his letters in those days were few and far between, and contained little concerning himself and his movements. But afterward, when he began to write more about our coming to join him in the home he had won for us, when I first began to realize that I had a father and to yearn for that father's love, then he wrote more fully, and then I came to know my hero!"

"They met while in Old Mexico, and at their first meeting my hero saved the life of my father—an entire stranger then—at the great risk of his own. The odds were terrible, and death seemed certain. But not after he came. It must have been gloriously terrible, though father never gave full particulars of that scene. I only know that when the victory was won, they were both wounded sorely, while about them lay almost the entire band of robbers."

"Father wrote more freely of all that followed—of how the gallant stranger carried him miles and leagues on his back, stopping now and then to fight for his life against heavy odds, never leaving him, never caring for himself un-

til they at length reached safety. And he a perfect stranger until that awful moment when the robbers were torturing their helpless prisoner.

"When I read of this, Tom, do you wonder that I began to wish I could see and personally thank this stranger for my father's life? Is it so strange that I, a young school-girl at the time, always romantic and inclined to be a little visionary, perhaps, should draw the portrait of my unknown hero? That I should ponder and think over it all? That as time passed on, and still other letters came, one and all singing the praises of this hero, hardly one but what mentioned some kind, noble or heroic act, I should come to set him up as my model of all that was grand and good and lovable?"

"Stranger yet if the reality should come any ways near filling the bill," bluntly remarked Allen, whose matter-of-fact mind could but poorly enter into this schoolgirl dream.

"That would be unkind, if you really meant it, Tom, but I know you are fond of grumbling," placidly retorted Orabel; and Tom Allen the most easily satisfied young man in the world, save and except in that one wild, ridiculous wish of his, went on:

"A wild and woolly cowboy, of course! Bearded like a pard! With frowzy locks flying over his shoulder, innocent of brush or comb ever since he ran away to escape the paternal rod! With one cheek filled with plug, and a whisky flask in every pocket! Rolling out oaths that would cause the bark to fly from a black oak-tree! With a mania for shooting out lamps and making meek tenderfeet dance an Arizona jig to the sweet scents of an Arizona cocktail! How like you the picture, Ora?"

"Now gaze upon this," was the placid retort, her eyes fixed on vacancy, her cheeks softly suffused, her tones growing low and dreamy.

"A figure such as I described to you a bit ago. A face to match, with golden locks curling almost to the broad shoulders. Over the red lips a pair of mustaches, heavy, yet soft and silken. With blue eyes, full and bright as stars when the moon is hidden. With a voice that is full and deep and manly, yet soft and musical as that of a woman. With the air of a knight in the days of old, tender and true to friends, bold and unyielding to all enemies! Look at this picture, Tom, and behold my hero—the reality of my dreams!"

As he listened, Tom Allen became alarmed. She did not speak like one drawing a fancy portrait, but more as one who even then beheld the living, breathing reality. And yet—surely if this was so, he should have met this paragon?

"Orabel," leaning over and touching her arm, "you have met this man in more than your dreams?"

The black eyes met his frankly as she shook her head.

"Never in the flesh, Tom, but all the same I am telling you the truth, am painting a far more accurate picture than the one you drew."

Tom drew back with a long sigh, shaking his head dubiously.

"I don't know how to take you, Ora!"

"Then why make the attempt, Tom?" with a momentary gleam of womanly maliciousness, but which was quickly covered by the addition: "No, Tom, I have never met my hero in the flesh, but I am waiting patiently and content, knowing that the time will come, is coming. It is written in the book of fate. If not, I would not feel so wholly bound to him. I would have moments of doubting, of fear and trembling. Those I have not norever had. I know my hero will come. I know that he will prove all that my fancy has painted him, all that father thought and wrote he was; a man to the core! A man any woman might be proud to worship! In one word, a Man With a Record bright as day and pure as heaven itself!"

"It would take hours to repeat all that father wrote of his new friend. Enough that he told me he loved him as a son. That his dearest wish in life was to gain the right to give him that title, through me."

"And not a word from the hero himself through all this?" slowly asked Tom, gravely, beginning to have serious fears for the mind of the woman he loved so hopelessly. "Only your father wrote?"

Orabel flushed slightly under that steady gaze. It was the one faint blot on the otherwise perfect dream of her young life. Times without number she had asked herself that question: why had he never spoken one word for himself? Why had he never sent a message to the girl whom his old friend must have praised and spoken of so often?

"Never a word direct," she slowly replied. "Like me, he was content to wait until the appointed time for our meeting. Or he may never have known. Father was always peculiar, people say. He may never have spoken of us to him. Or not until the last. I know he did, then."

"Well, I give it up!" and Tom Allen sunk down in his saddle with a sigh of meek resignation. "It's too awfully utter for my limited comprehension. I'll listen. I'll do my level best to understand what it all amounts to in the end, but until then I've got to pass!"

"There is not much more to tell," added Ora, with a backward toss of her queenly head, as though she too had to make an effort to keep to the thread of discourse. "As you know, father was taken ill and died suddenly, with only two friends near him. One was dear old Hurly Burly, and the other was—my hero!"

"Did everybody call him by that name, or was he, like ordinary mortals, given an every day handle?"

"Captain Crisp, father called him at first. Afterward, it was always Willard."

Tom started, his sleepy air vanishing like magic. At last they seemed to be coming to something tangible, for surely he had heard that name before, and not so many days ago. A moment of perplexity, then a light sprung through the mist.

"I heard some of the men on the ranch speaking about him, only a day or two ago!" he ejaculated. "I paid no particular attention then, but I wish I had, now!"

"And I have heard a full score mention his daring exploits," Orabel added, quietly. "I am not sure that he was ever in this part of the country, though he may have been. I know that he was away in Old Mexico when father died, for Hurly Burly told us as much. He would have said more, but I gave him no encouragement, then. And afterward, as you know, we have seen very little of the dear, rough, tender old bear. But whenever we met he was full of his memories of Captain Crisp. Like father before him, he never tired of singing the praises of his hero. That is what he called him once. For the rest, he preferred to call him a Man With a Record."

"I thought that sounded something like the condensed hurricane, though I only saw him once, and then but for a moment, to my—ahem!—sorrow," uttered Tom, with a wry twist of that side of his face furthest from the lady.

"He brought me the last word I ever received from the hand of poor father," added Orabel, her voice softened and low. "In it—I promised to be perfectly frank and open, Tom, dear. In it father spoke more openly than ever before about his young friend. It was that last message—a wish from the grave, Tom!—that fairly settled my poor foolish waverings, and made me consider myself pledged for life. In that letter he told me how dearly he wished I might become the wife of the man who saved him from death by torture. He would lay no commands, but simply begged me to please him if I could without too great pressure on my inclinations."

"The surest way to win you over!" muttered Tom, beneath his breath.

"He told me all that Captain Crisp had been to him in those long and wearisome years of fighting against fate. Told me how deeply he had come to love him, how thoroughly he grew to respect and honor his sterling manhood. He said he was one man in ten thousand. That there was not a single drop of impure blood in his veins. That he was brave and honorable, true and generous, one of whom any woman might be proud, no matter what her station in life. And then he went on to speak of the record he had gained in life: a record without a single blot or blemish."

Tom Allen rubbed his fat chin thoughtfully, a shrewd light coming into his pale blue eyes. It seemed to him that, with no disrespect for the dead, Morris Hilliard protested too much, dwelt too long on the acquired merits of his young hero. Surely, in writing to a young woman of a destined husband, he might have said more about the qualities that woman would naturally have first in mind?

"And the picture you drew for me, was but a copy of the one sent me by your father, Ora? Or did he send you an actual likeness?"

"Neither," was the reply, Orabel apparently not catching his real drift. "I have no picture of my hero, but I feel that I have not made any serious mistake in making one for you. In a few minor details I may be out, but there only. It is a revelation, I almost believe," and her head bowed a trifle as she laughed softly, shyly.

"And Hurley Burr came to you alone? Captain Crisp was not with him, of course?" innocently inquired Tom, though his eyes gave a little twinkle as he saw the quick flush that swept across her cheek.

Just then it did him good to touch her a trifle, though never a man lived who had less of malice in his composition than honest Tom.

"I told you he was away in the south, on business."

"That was nearly a year ago, I believe. During that time—you know you asked me to treat you like a brother, Ora, and so I claim a brother's privilege—how many letters have you received from him?"

Orabel glanced quickly into his face, her eyes opening wide.

"None. Why should I? I have never written to him, and—"

Tom laughed as though he was just beginning to enjoy himself, and then, as those dark eyes still watched him seriously, wondering, he checked his mirth long enough to utter:

"Then I'm getting up in the world, sure enough! I've tried my level best to show forth a full fledged hero, such as I knew you dreamed

about, Ora, and here I find myself successful—at least, more of a hero than even your cherished paladin!"

"Tom!"

"Because he hasn't the courage to face you, even with everything smoothed for him and all the chances in his favor. While I—with everything against me, I'm bold and heroic enough to avow my love and dare your displeasure, Orabel!"

Tom was sorry the moment he uttered those words, for her face was averted, not so quickly but that he saw how pale it grew.

"Forgive me, Ora, dear," he muttered, leaning toward her as their animals came to a halt close beside a small but dense *motte* of trees and undergrowth. "I didn't mean that. I hardly know what I did mean, I'm so thoroughly upset to-day!"

It was a laughing, beaming countenance that flashed upon his puzzled eyes a moment later. Surely he had wounded her sharply? If so, she certainly showed no signs of it now.

Almost before he could ask himself this question, there came another complete change, and with her figure drawn proudly erect, her dark eyes glowing, her voice quick and clear, Orabel cried:

"I love him! I worship him! And naught mortal man can say will ever alter that fact! I learned to know him from the letters my father wrote. To doubt him even for an instant is to cast a reflection upon the dead—my dead."

"I didn't really mean what I said, Ora," meekly muttered Tom, his lips quivering, with such a wistful gaze in his honest eyes. "Remember what a blow this all is to me! Remember how I love you. Love? It is more like adoration, such as one might feel for an angel in heaven!"

Orabel softened at that. She would have been more or less than woman had such not been the case. It is not often that one of her sex secures such perfect love, and for the moment Tom Allen, fat, clumsy, blundering, anything but romantic, seemed but a little short of noble in her sight.

"And I did not mean to reproach you, dear old friend," she said, her voice softer, one hand touching his arm with the soft, caressing gesture that seemed peculiar with her. "I was only trying to make you comprehend how settled is my future. I hold myself bound by the holiest of ties. I am not free even to listen to love words from other lips. I am his—his alone!"

"May his good luck break his neck!" savagely muttered Tom, beneath his breath, as Orabel once more turned away and gazed over the pleasant plain.

"He is my idol, my day-star! I know he will come in his own good time, and until then I am content to wait."

"And if he should never come, Ora?"

"He will come," was the quiet reply.

"Yes, or break his neck in trying, if he only suspected all that awaits him, I know. But accidents will happen. Men can't do or have all they would like—worse luck me! Something may hinder him from ever coming to claim his prize. Then, Orabel?"

"Then I will die as I have lived thus far, simply Orabel Hilliard," was the slow, steady response.

Tom gave his rotund waist a savage punch as he caught these words and saw the steady, resolute look upon the proud face. He knew she meant all she said, but for the life of him he could not choke back the bold speech that leaped to his lips.

"Not if I can help it, Ora!"

She gazed at him a little wonderingly. His rosy face grew still more rosy, but he unflinchingly met her gaze as he added:

"I mean it, every word, Ora! If he never comes to claim you, I'll put in mine again—ay! and make it good, too!"

"You, Tom?" the half-bewildered girl ejaculated.

"Even I, Ora," with a defiant nod of his head and snapping of his blue eyes. "Rather than that, I'll even turn robber knight and carry you off to my ruined castle by force of arms! I'll play the hero to your heart's content! I'll curdle my milk of human kindness, and treat you so abominably that you'll be glad to marry me to get rid of me! I will, so help me!"

Bombastic enough for the most romantic, surely! Fat Thomas was coming out in grand style this eventful day!

Orabel gazed at him with growing marvel. She began to see that there was far more in this little fat, blundering man than she had ever given him credit for. And, to tell the truth, she found him far more agreeable in this fantastic mood than his usual sleepy, commonplace one.

Yet she frowned a little; not enough to blast him at once, but quite sufficient to disarm the poor fellow who lived on her smiles.

"Don't grow too ridiculous, Tom, dear," she uttered coolly. "The bombastic suit does not fit you at all."

"My infernal waist!" muttered Tom, giving it another fierce dig.

Orabel was forced to avert her face to hide her smiles. But it was only for an instant. When she again turned her eyes upon him, they

were grave and serious. Her voice was low, but firm and resolute.

"Of course you never meant anything of the sort, Tom, but I trust you will never treat this subject as a jest again."

"A mighty sorry jest I find it!"

"If only for that reason, Tom, you should be willing and even glad to let it drop forever," added that grave voice. "You must know nothing good can ever come of it. We can be good friends—the best of friends. I like you. I respect you, when you are in your sober senses. I have not a friend on earth whose good-will I would more regret losing than I would yours. But liking is not love, as you view it. Of that, I have none to give you, will never have."

"Tom," and once more her little hand coaxingly touched his arm, and her dark eyes sought to catch his as they drooped, but vainly. "I ask this of you as a sister. Don't ever talk to me again as you have this day, or even friendship may be denied you!"

He glanced up and met her gaze firmly. His usually florid countenance was very pale, and his hearty voice but little more than a husky whisper as he spoke:

"I would promise if I could, Ora, but I'd only break my word. That I'll never do, knowingly. I can't see you every day and keep down my love. It grows hotter and stronger every hour. If I see you, I must keep on loving you! I can only go away, if you say so."

"But I don't say it, Tom. I don't want you to go away, for then Mary would leave me also. I can't lose her—I don't want to lose you! Why won't you promise, Tom, dear? Surely it is not so hard?"

"I'll try, Ora, but I'll slip up on it, sure!" he muttered.

"It is a vow!" with a clear laugh, as she tore the scarlet scarf from her shoulders, waving it in the air. "My love is a hero—one who knows no fear—who would ride to death for a smile from my lips! Who would dash headlong into the lowest pits of Tartarus for a gage like this!"

Again she waved the brilliant folds above her head, giving way to one of the wild, breathless fits that so often had come upon her of late. And as she did so, there came a deep, hoarse, angry bellow, followed by the sharp crashing of undergrowth in the timber island!

CHAPTER III.

THE GOOD ENOUGH FOREMAN.

THE sounds came from close at hand, and almost before Orabel could turn her eyes in that direction, a gaunt bull broke cover and with another hoarse, angry bellow, charged straight for her.

One older and more experienced in life on a cattle ranch than Ora might well have been startled, for, like a "rogue" elephant, there are members of these half-wild herds dangerous to meet with, no matter when or where. And unless appearances lied, this bull was a veritable rogue.

His coat was rough and staring, the hair apparently turned the wrong way, bristling up in a stiff mane along his back and neck. His sides and breast were torn and scarred, some of the cuts still showing raw and livid as though recently inflicted. His eyes glowed savagely. There was untamable ferocity in every movement.

The truth flashed upon Orabel as by instinct, and she jerked sharply at the double reins, her horse starting back with a snort of mingled pain and affright as the cruel curb cut his jaw.

She had casually heard talk of misanthropic bulls on the range since coming to Good Enough Ranch; of bulls driven from the herd by those of their kind stronger and bolder, generally after terrible battles where wounds deep and many were inflicted on both sides. Of how, while the one-time monarch of the herd was still weak from his hurts, other bulls, until then afraid to venture nigh him, would crowd and gore the fallen leader until he was finally driven away from the herd, to sulk and meditate and recuperate as best he might. And she had heard, too, how, like the old rogue elephant, such a bull would unhesitatingly attack any footman who might be so unlucky as to chance across his retreat, and even, at times assail a horseman.

Tom Allen was almost as much startled at the hoarse bellow and crashing of undergrowth as his fair companion, though he failed to comprehend the full danger at first. He saw only a half-wild bull who was momentarily enraged by the flaunting before its eyes of the scarlet scarf, and with a sharp cry he flung up one fat hand.

"Hi! there, you brute! Skin out o' this or I'll warm your ugly hide until—"

"Beware, Tom!" hastily cried Orabel, her face pale as death, her dark eyes widely distended and showing how thoroughly she was alarmed. "Turn and ride—ride for dear life!"

Tom did turn, but it was not of his own free will. With a snort of alarm, his trained horse wheeled and dashed away, despite the vigorous jerking at the bit. Better far than its "green" rider did the mustang know this ugly customer!

A savage snort and shaking of its armed head, then the long sharp horns were turned to the front, backed by the strong neck and heavy frame as the bull charged in desperate earnest, straight at Orabel. Even then the experienced horse would have carried her to perfect safety, startled and confused though she was, bearing with all her strength on the cruel, jaw-breaking curb, had not one of its hoofs slipped at the edge of a small burrow in the soil just as it wheeled to flee. Its foot turned, its head flung up with a shrill, frightened neigh as it plunged confusedly forward, barely escaping a complete fall, hampered still more by that ill-managed curb.

Two cries were mingled then; one of terror from the paled lips of Orabel, and one of encouragement from Tom as he savagely checked his runaway steed and whirled to the rescue.

And almost drowning these came that savage, ugly bellow as the rogue bull plunged on, giving its long horns a vicious flirt sideways as the hampered horse whirled aside once more.

Another cry from Orabel as she felt the heavy shock, as she felt and heard a sound that cannot be described—the ripping of living flesh!

She closed her eyes to shut out what seemed the end, clinging convulsively to the saddle as her good horse reeled beneath the shock, a snort of pain escaping its nostrils. For a single instant it reeled dizzily upon its legs, almost overturned by the savage thrust, but then it managed to recover itself and to leap aside as the savage bull again turned with armed front, bellowing more viciously than ever.

"Hold on, Ora!" she faintly, indistinctly heard through the sickening dizziness. "Hold on, for life! I'll manage the critter!"

Tom Allen began to realize something of the actual peril, now, as he witnessed the savage motions of the brute, but he had thoughts only for the woman he loved so dearly, and all unarmed as he was, he urged his good horse on to the rescue.

Like an inspiration there came to him a remembrance of a feat which he had more than once witnessed since his arrival at Good Enough Ranch, by which a cowboy would take all the ugliness out of a bull or steer, and for lack of a better method, in his present unarmed state, he resolved to "tail the bull!"

A more favorable opportunity could hardly have offered itself. The bull paid no attention to him, its entire hatred being directed toward the animal whose blood already reddened the tip of one sharp horn. It was just wheeling from its baffled charge to make another, which threatened to be more successful, thanks to the unlucky use which Orabel was making of the curb in her terror.

His horse seemed to divine the wishes of its rider, and carried Tom close to the rear of the bull. With a strong, sure grasp he caught the flying tail, and flinging all his strength into the effort, sought to overthrow the animal by main strength, crying determinedly:

"Over goes your house, though it was big as a—ugh!"

It had seemed such a simple thing while he was watching the cowboy! A touch, a heave, a swift movement, and over would tumble the animal, helpless as a new-born calf, while the cowboy would utter his wild cheer or ringing laugh, giving not the slightest signs of having exerted himself. So easy that Tom, never a bit of a braggart or boaster, declared that he could perform the same feat himself at the first attempt. And he had fully determined to try it, too, but his constitutional indolence had kept him from doing so. Until now—worse luck!

A wilder, fiercer bellow than ever burst from the mad bull as it flung its head at the rear, and its supple body curved sideways like a bow as it flung high its armed head. At the same time Tom's horse reared aside to avoid the flying feet which it naturally expected. And between the two, poor Tom was plucked from the saddle and sent sprawling in the dust!

He struck the earth with a force that drove the breath from his lungs with an explosive snort, but his grip was not shaken. He clung to the hairy tail like grim death, and as the savage bull wheeled about to avenge the insult, it aided the fat man to gain his feet.

Orabel saw the accident which befell her escort, and a cry of alarm escaped her lips. She forgot her own peril then in fears for his life, and dropping the cruel curb, she caught at a revolver with trembling fingers, crying out:

"Run, Tom—run for cover, while I shoot the ugly brute!"

"You run! I'm all right, unless this handle—pulls out!"

It was no time to pick and choose one's words, and there was a trace of the ridiculous in the ones which burst explosively from the lips of the fat lover; but they at least possessed the merit of utter sincerity. Tom had thoughts and fears only for his beloved. If she could escape—after that would be time enough to take thought for his own safety.

Orabel hardly caught his words. Her horse, thoroughly frightened, quivering with pain from the ugly gash in its thigh, no longer cramped by that powerful curb, whirled about and darted away over the plain, almost unseating its fair

rider as she tried to pull a weapon from her tightly-fitting belt.

Tom saw the dash, and fancied that his advice was being taken. He had time for only the one glance. Then he was kept busy enough!

It was no light weight hung to its tail, but the bull was strong and thoroughly angry. It whirled round and round, snorting, bellowing, routing, trying to double sufficiently far to test its sharp horns on its enemy. And Tom, beginning to feel that a tail hold was better than none, in this case, at least, swung around his other hand and doubled his grip with the energy of desperation.

"You—ugly—brute!" came joltingly through his tightly-clinched teeth. "I'll—learn—you—something!"

Poor Tom! He had no time to realize the ridiculousness of this savage threat, but he meant it all. He was mad. He was furious. And he resolved to maintain his grip though it resulted in the bull's losing tail and backbone together!

Round and round tore the maddened bull. In a larger circle swung Tom Allen, his fat legs twinkling with a rapidity marvelous in one of his build and natural indolence. Enormous strides were those he took, and every moment it seemed as though the next must see him lose his footing—see him flung off at a tangent, when little short of a miracle could preserve him from a cruel and frightful death.

Something of this Tom himself realized; but for his natural obstinacy he would have cared little how soon that end might come. For the thought of what a supremely ridiculous spectacle he must be presenting at that moment—his flying legs, his reddened face, his awkward dives and plunges—came to him just then, and he could not help casting a glance around in quest of Orabel. If she had fled—if she was only out of eye-range!

Poor Tom! it was hard!

With all his desperate striving to near the lofty height, the exalted ideal of which his lady love dreamed, to fall so low as this! And before her very eyes, too!

For Orabel had managed to secure control over her wounded, frightened horse, and forgetting her own fears in the face of the peril which threatened her friend, she was riding back, pistol in hand, to save him from a cruel death beneath those trampling hoofs, from those sharp horns.

"It's—just—my—luck!" exploded poor Tom, a mist coming over his vision as the mad bull redoubled its efforts to reach him.

"Hold fast, Tom, dear!" he could just distinguish.

And then, as her horse planted its forefeet firmly and refused to venture nearer, Orabel thrust forward her pistol and opened fire.

If Tom could only have realized it, just then, he might have taken some faint consolation, for, after all, Orabel was but a woman. She could risk her own life in behalf of a friend, as now, but she could not entirely forget her fears of firearms. And even as she desperately pulled trigger, she shut her eyes and averted her face! Tom heard the report above the roasting of the furious bull, and the mist fled from before his eyes. He saw Orabel—saw her shooting away with averted face! And something nearer akin to fear than anything he had as yet felt for himself, came to him then. Only for a moment. Then the thought flashed across his whirling brain:

"Shoot on! better by your hand than butchered by this brute!"

One of the bits of lead hit and stung the bull sharply, causing it to plunge forward with a suddenness that broke the grip of Tom Allen, sending him end over end a dozen yards away, partially stunning him with the force of his fall. And before he could scramble to his feet, the infuriated animal had wheeled and was charging upon him, front lowered until the blood-red muzzle swept the ground, until the sharp horns turned to the front, ready to pin the luckless lover to the earth!

Tom saw this, and had barely time to roll swiftly over once or twice as the mad bull came thundering past. He escaped, but by little more than a hair's breadth. And as he strove to rise, casting a glance over his shoulder, poor Tom saw the bull check its rush, wheeling and starting for him again, more vicious than ever.

A low, gasping moan broke from his lips. He could do no more. His bodily powers seemed to desert him all at once. He could neither flee nor fight. Death seemed inevitable!

But it was not to be thus. At the very instant when death seemed about to claim its victim, a sharp report rung out and the mad bull plunged forward upon its head, turning clear over and almost crushing the gasping man beneath its heavy bulk. And an instant later there came a clear, encouraging shout, the clatter of hoofs, and a horseman swept between the prostrate man and the quivering animal, stooping low in the saddle and catching Tom by the shoulder, raising him clear of the ground and swinging him to the pommel of the saddle, all without checking the pace of his good horse in the least degree!

It was a truly marvelous exhibition of skill

and power combined, and a little cry of wondering admiration escaped the lips of Orabel Hilliard as she witnessed the exploit—saw her friend, whom she had given over as doomed to death, plucked from out the very jaws of destruction. And with this sight came the reaction. Her courage gave way, and sobbing hysterically, she covered her eyes with her hands, swaying in her seat as though she would fall to the earth.

The new-comer saw this, saw that her still frightened horse was on the point of breaking away, and with an easy dexterity he lowered Tom Allen to the ground, then dashed swiftly to the side of the overcome maiden, one strong arm lending her its support, while the free hand held the trembling horse in subjection.

"It's all over now, Miss Hilliard," he uttered in a quiet yet reassuring voice. "The young gent is right side up, an' I don't reckon thar's any great harm done."

"It is you, Fuller?" murmured Orabel, rallying bravely, though hardly conscious what words escaped her lips.

"Yes, ma'am, it's me. I jest happened to come by—"

"None too soon, either! Only for your coming, poor Tom would have been killed! And I—I brought it all upon him with my folly!"

"Well, ma'am, I wouldn't worry over it now," added that cool, quiet voice. "They ain't no harm done, an' it'll be one more thing to talk over when you want somethin' to laugh at."

They were moving toward the spot where Tom Allen had dropped in a limp and nerveless heap to the ground, and low as was the voice which uttered those words, the fat lover caught their meaning and a hollow groan escaped his lips.

"Tom—you are hurt!" gasped Orabel, anxiously.

"Hurt? Mortally wounded!" muttered Tom, his flushed face in his plump palms, his figure shaking like a mold of jelly.

"Whar, boss?" hurriedly exclaimed his rescuer, leaping to the ground and bending over the groaning lover. "Mebbe it ain't as bad as ye think fer, when we come to look."

"Worse—a thousand times worse! I'll never recover from it! I wouldn't if I could!"

"Let me—it is all my fault!" brokenly uttered Orabel, and she held out her hand for assistance to the man whom she had called Fuller. "Poor Tom—"

"Worse than poor Tom!" groaned that individual, with a vigor remarkable in one at the point of death. "Miserable—wretched—disgraced—all boiled down and condensed into one—and that luckless one Tom Allen! Somebody take pity and knock me in the head!"

"I don't see no bad hurts, ma'am," calmly uttered Fuller, as he glanced toward the fair lady of the Good Enough Ranch. "I reckon he's a leetle off his base, so to speak, ma'am."

"Base—too base for any use!" and Tom gave a ghastly smile as he uncovered his face and feebly struggled to his feet. "So base that you couldn't pass me off on a blind man for genuine. And I thought it was my turn for playing the hero! Good Lord!"

The truth was out now, and Orabel, so great was her relief when she found her natural fears were without foundation, broke into a fit of laughter, long and hysterical.

"It's fun—glorious fun!" muttered poor Tom, furtively rubbing his most painful bruises, a dolefully injured expression struggling with the air of lofty scorn which he vainly essayed to assume. "I'm a clown by practice if not by profession, and when the keen edge wears off of this laugh, I'm ready to supply food for another. It's all I'm fit for—a laughing-stock!"

The hysterical laugh ceased abruptly. Orabel signed to Fuller, who quickly lifted her from the saddle, retaining control of the wounded animal while Orabel walked swiftly over to where poor Tom stood, sullen and desponding, unconscious of her approach until he felt her trembling touch on his shoulder. Then he whirled about with a ferocious scowl, that instantly faded away as he looked into those dark eyes, now filled with tears, with a sorrow and pity that made that awkward lump suddenly come back to his throat once more.

"Tom, dear, you don't know how deeply you are wounding me!" murmured Orabel, her red lips quivering something like those of an aggrieved child. "Only for you, I would have been killed by that awful brute!"

The fat man's face brightened a little at these words, but only for a moment. He could not readily forget that laugh, conscious as he was, painfully so, that he had given such ample reason for its birth.

"No, I didn't, Ora. You was clear off when I had to put in and—make a more ridiculous spectacle of myself than even nature intended when she cast my mold. If it only had broken—or shrunk!—in the drying!"

That was another of his whimsical notions, and in her present agitated state Orabel could not entirely keep from laughing.

"You see?" and Tom shook his bare head with dogged resignation. "The slightest recall is

enough to set you to laughing. When you know what I had so foolishly dreamed, is it—bah! That's enough!"

With unusual rudeness for him, Tom turned away and limped over to where his hat lay in the dust stirred loose by the trampling horse. He silently brushed it with his sleeve, studiously keeping his face hidden from view. There was a moisture in his eyes, a quivering about his lips, that he did not care for Orabel to see just then.

Quietly, unobtrusively, Lark Fuller, the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch, had watched this peculiar interview, standing by the side of the wounded horse. His face was grave and impassive, though the faint twinkle in his gray eyes told that he fully appreciated the situation, and took in its quaint humor. Indeed, there were few things that escaped those cool, steady orbs.

Tom Allen cast a quick glance in that direction, and a faint smile came into his face, encouraging Orabel to once more approach him.

"Tom, won't you forgive me?" she murmured, appealingly.

"For laughing? You couldn't help it, Ora," and Tom himself laughed a little, though his usual heartiness was lacking. "I would have laughed myself, only I had no time to spare. I never knew a gentleman cow could trip the light fantastic quite nimbly, before! What a picture it would have made, were an artist near enough to catch it with a camera! I trying to pull that brute's tail out by the roots, and you dashing to the rescue like some modern Britomartis with a revolver for a spear! I only hope that fellow appreciated the spectacle!"

"Don't, Tom, dear," and Orabel pressed his arm with a trembling hand, her voice unsteady, her eyes dimming. "Don't try to make a jest of it, just now. Think what it might have been!"

"So I am, and right there I glean the only bit of comfort I ever expect to have," impulsively uttered Tom, with a glance and nod toward the quiet foreman of the Good Enough Ranch. "I'm thinking how much worse for me it might have been. Say, if yonder good fellow had only been your longed-for hero! Captain Crisp, you are not *all* lucky, else you would never have missed such a glorious opportunity for introducing yourself to your divinity!"

Orabel turned away, hurt more than she cared to show him. Tom bit his lips savagely, regretting the impulse that had given those words birth, but he was not yet ready to ask forgiveness. He was too sore, in both body and mind, to feel humble.

And it was naught save the truth he had spoken, after all. Scarce had he been rescued from what had, for one instant, seemed inevitable death, than that awful thought occurred to him: what if this bold rider should prove to be none other than the man whom he had so suddenly learned to hate and envy, the redoubtable Man With a Record!

Not much like that hero looked Lark Fuller as Tom Allen glanced toward him once more. Anything less like the glorious picture drawn by Orabel Hilliard could scarcely be found.

Hardly up to the average height of mankind, Lark Fuller had the arms and shoulders of one inches taller than himself, giving him at the first glance a somewhat stunted appearance. In repose he looked even clumsy, though none would call him that who had seen him in action.

Close cropped hair and full beard of a dingy brown color; a hooked nose, small and resolute; wide mouth, with thin, flexible lips; a strong chin which, with his square jaws, gave him a look not wholly unlike a bulldog of the human species; small gray eyes which, when in repose, as now, one could see were slightly crossed.

On his head a gray felt hat, worn and stained. A blue flannel shirt with rolling collar, confined by a loosely-knotted black silk kerchief. Trowsers of gray moleskin, tucked into the tops of heavy riding-boots, spurred at the heels. About his waist a leather belt, full of cartridges for the brace of heavy revolvers, and the magazine rifle which hung in slings at his saddle-bow.

Not much like the feared paladin was Lark Fuller, and Tom Allen was properly thankful for that slight consolation!

Tom moved forward and held out one hand, which was taken in a firm and close grip by the foreman of Good Enough Ranch.

"Mr. Fuller, I thank you for your kindness in coming to my assistance a bit ago," stiffly uttered Tom.

Lark laughed softly, his gray eyes twinkling good-humoredly.

"Never mention it boss. It cost me nothing."

"Excuse me, sir," and Tom bowed with exaggerated politeness, only to draw his fat figure up stiffly erect as though moved by springs. "It was my duty to thank you, and I've performed it to the best of my ability. At the same time, sir, I feel much more like thrashing you for what you've done! I do sir, most decidedly!"

The gray eyes gazed into his flushed countenance steadily, surprise filling their depths as Lark Fuller uttered:

"Sorry you feel that way, boss," he gently

replied, one hand softly stroking his beard. "I didn't mean to hurt ye, but you see they wasn't much time to think o' ceremony. I wasn't dead sure the bull was finished off, fer I hedn't much time to pick a place to plant my lead. They mought 'a' bin life enough left in him to do you damage, an' so I tuck the shortest way to git you out o' his reach."

Tom shook his head, gloomily.

"That isn't it. You handled me like a baby—and I only wish I had half your muscle!" at the same time reaching out and gingerly feeling of the strong right arm. "What I object to is your interfering at all! Why couldn't you let the play go on? Why didn't you let that infernal brute make a clean job of it?"

Lark Fuller stared in growing amazement.

"'Nother breath, an' he would 'a' done it, sure!" he muttered.

"I wish he had!" impulsively cried poor Tom, flushing redly as he glanced toward Orabel, and recalled the past horrible scene. "Through him and my unlucky stars, I'd suffered worse than a score of deaths! I had covered myself with ridicule—made an infernal show of myself! That would have been bad enough, even with death to cover part of it up, but to come through it alive—to walk the earth, knowing that as often as I come beneath her eyes, the whole abominable scene will come back to her memory! Confound you, Mr. Fuller! why didn't you keep your fingers out of the pie?"

Few men could have done it, but Lark Fuller never even smiled at this ridiculous outburst, and his voice was calm and even as he said:

"If you'll look over it this time, boss, I'll promise never to chip in ag'in without your askin'. Won't that do?"

CHAPTER IV.

A SHOT FROM AMBUSH.

THERE was such simple earnestness in the voice, mingling with an ardent desire to please, that a much harder man than Tom Allen must have given way. And yet, as he gazed keenly into those bright gray eyes, steady and sober though they were, he felt a vague suspicion that the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch was laughing at him. But only for an instant did he hold thus. Lark was too simple-natured for his eyes to say one thing while his heart said another.

"I'll forgive you this time, old fellow, but mind you: don't you ever do the like again, or there'll be a ruction in camp, sure!"

Tom frowned portentously, and his tones were sharp and stern, but there was a cordiality in his grasp that made ample amends. Lark nodded, his eyes twinkling brightly.

Tom lowered his voice, hurriedly adding:

"And if you could manage to forget it all, my good fellow, so you wouldn't ever feel tempted to talk about it at the ranch, I'll take care you don't lose anything by it."

"Ef you say so, boss, that's enough. An' yit, 'tain't every man that would want it kept secret. To be sure, they come a little lip-up at the end, but what went afore more'n made up fer that. I see it all—"

Tom gave an ejaculation that was almost as much an oath as a groan, again glancing toward Orabel.

"That's it! If you'd been born blind and dumb and deaf and paralyzed, I wouldn't care so much! Good Lord! I begin to wish I'd died and been buried before ever I came to this in—"

"Tom, dear," and a little hand touched his arm, turning him about as quickly and surely as though it had the power so recently displayed by the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch.

It was a face unusually sad and grave and reproachful that met his half-dogged gaze, but the bitter shaft still rankled, and he muttered:

"It's so, Orabel, and I can't help it. You look grave enough now, but I saw you laughing then!"

"Tom!"

"I don't blame you, Ora. It was enough to make a corpse get up in its shroud and howl with rapture—I know that. But, all the same, it hurts! And I was going to save you so grandly!"

"You did save her," quickly interposed Lark Fuller, speaking with an ardor such as he rarely exhibited when in the presence of any of the owners or guests of Good Enough Ranch. "Saved her from broken bones, if no worse. I could see it all, though you was too busy to notice me. She was crampin' her critter all up with her cairb, an' it was lucky a man was nigh to help her out. Only fer you, boss, there'd be bitter black mournin' at the Good Enough Ranch this blessed night!"

"Now will you believe me, Tom?" and Orabel half-laughed, half-sobbed. "I was the foolish, ridiculous one, not you. If any one is to be ashamed of this adventure, it is I, not you!"

"An' ef they's any blame goin' the rounds, I reckon it b'longs by rights to me fer not findin' the critter afore," quietly uttered Lark Fuller, as he deftly formed the lariat hanging from the saddle-bow into a hopple for the wounded horse. "I set out to put the bull out o' the way, soon's I heard of his goin' on the rampage, so's to run no chances. Though it ain't often they trouble a body on hossback."

"It was my foolish waving that scarf," murmured Orabel.

"Red is a mighty pritty color, ma'am, though they is safer ones to use whar the longhorns is plenty," smiled Lark Fuller, as he leaped lightly into his saddle, uncoiling the lasso that hung from his pommel. "I'll rope your critter, boss, an' won't keep you more'n a minnit."

He was as good as his word, quickly dropping the noose over the head of the runaway, leading him back and turning him over to Allen.

"Your critter, ma'am, ain't hurt much, but mebber it'd be better ef I changed saddles with my boss. He'll kerry you like a cradle, an' I'll go bail he won't trip nur stumble nur flinch, let what will lay in the trail. He don't need the cairb. It was that what made the trouble for you with the other."

While he was speaking, Lark was at work, and now with a bow he presented his fair young mistress with her new mount, turning away and releasing the wounded animal from its hopple, mounting and riding away in the direction of the ranch.

"Mr. Fuller!" impulsively cried Orabel, adding, as the foreman wheeled and returned quickly: "You will please make no mention of this little adventure at home."

"I didn't 'low to, ma'am," with a bright smile in those gray eyes. "My wu'st inemies never yit accused me of gabbin' out o' season."

"But he'll laugh all the more to himself, though!" muttered Tom, his wounds still rankling. "And you, Orabel—I'll be ashamed to ever look you in the face again!"

There was no immediate response. The maiden stood watching the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch until his mount carried him over the nearest rise in the prairie. Then she signed for Tom to assist her into the saddle. Without a word he obeyed. Without a word she rode slowly over the plain, Tom bearing her company, equally silent.

Then Orabel turned suddenly upon her gloomy escort, saying:

"Tom, you are making it awfully hard work for me to keep the tears out of my eyes! Do you want to make me hate you?"

"Rather hate than despise, anyhow!" he muttered.

"Do you think I despise you, Tom? Do you really think that?"

Her voice was lower, her tones far from steady, and there was an unusual moisture in her dark eyes as she gazed reproachfully at him; but Tom was looking moodily downward, and saw it not.

"If you don't just now, you will when you come to think it all over. How can you help it?" with sudden desperation. "Think of what a monstrous spectacle I made of myself! Think of my flying around at the heels of an ugly brute like that! Me, with my shapeless shapel! Good Lord! it's enough to make a man shrivel up and die of very shame!"

"But the same thing would have happened to anybody who might have tried to save me that way, Tom."

"No it wouldn't, or if it had, everybody wouldn't have my unlucky shape to add to the picture! And only to think how—Orabel," and there came a sudden gravity into the face and tones of the luckless lover. "You can't begin to understand how horribly this cuts me. You have only dreamt of being in love. With me it is a sober, awful reality, knowing as I do that my passion is worse than hopeless!"

"Tom, you promised—"

"And in the same breath warned you that I'd break all such. No, Orabel, there's only one thing for me to do; go away and keep away. But before I do that, I must have my say out."

There was no response, though Tom Allen paused as though expecting something. After a brief silence he added:

"You will never comprehend what a poor, weak, fanciful idiot I have been for the last month. You couldn't—no one could without going through the mill just as I have!"

"I was never quite wild enough in my folly to believe that I could ever win your love, Ora. I knew your romantic nature too well for that. I knew what sort of ideal you had formed. Mary told me that, even if I hadn't been able to guess at it. But I did think I could win and retain your esteem and respect."

"Both of which you have, Tom, dear," and Orabel smiled through her tears as she held out her hand to clasp his.

Tom pressed it gently, bowed his head and just touched his lips to the dainty finger-tips, then dropping it and resuming:

"Surely I was born under an unlucky star, for whenever I thought to appear at my very best before you, then I was sure to cover myself with ridicule and mortification. You know this, Orabel!"

"I know that your true, manly heart, your frank good humor, your honesty and nobleness, more than balance that, Tom."

"You are very kind to say so, Orabel, but all the same, I know you will never be able to forget the figure I cut back yonder, flying around like a rag tied to the tail of that infernal old bull!"

There was such utter disgust in his face and

tones as he uttered the words that, shaken as her nerves had been, Orabel could not refrain from laughing outright, even while tears dimmed her eyes. Tom frowned black as midnight for a moment, but then his old good nature reasserted itself, and his laughter mingled with hers. Like magic the clouds fled, and Orabel could again recognize her old friend.

"After all, what's the use of crying when laughing comes so much more natural, little one?" cheerily observed the fat lover. "We both did our level best, and if neither made a complete success of it, be sure I'll never forget how nobly you came back to save me, Orabel!"

"I hardly know what I did, Tom, I was so awfully excited!" cried the maiden, smiling through her tears, very thankful that he had taken a more agreeable trail at last.

"I thought as much when I saw you blazing away, in my direction, with your face averted and your eyes tight closed," laughed Allen.

"Did I act that way, Tom, really?"

"You did, for a scandalous fact! And I remember thinking that it would be a more comfortable death to fall by one of your bullets than to be pounded to a pomace—"

"Don't, Tom, dear!" with a nervous little shiver.

"I won't. We'll let it go if you say so, and solemnly swear and vow never to reveal our mutual secrets to living individual. And when you catch yourself thinking what a beautiful figure I cut tripping the light fantastic, just remind your dear self that I'm grinning over your firing at a flying target, with your pretty eyes all drawn into a knot, will you, Ora?"

"Don't talk of it any more, please, Tom!"

"Why not?" and there was no trace of bitterness remaining in his honest face or cheery tone. "Surely it was exciting enough to bear talking over. And then, perhaps, it will be easier to forget it if we give it a thorough discussion now—who knows?"

"As you please, Tom, dear," said Orabel, with a meekness foreign to her rather imperious disposition under ordinary circumstances.

Possibly she remembered that there was a still less palatable subject which might be introduced instead.

"It was just like my usual folly to think that at last my opportunity had arrived," said Tom, with a little laugh. "I didn't really believe there was any danger at first, you know, Ora. I'm going to be as frank and open as day from this on, and so I admit this much at the send-off."

"I fancied the brute was like the common run of cattle, and that a few sharp words would send him to the rightabout. I knew, too, the traditional horror your gentle sex have of such creatures, and I thought I might pose as a sort of hero in your sight by cowering the terrific intruder. If you could only understand how—"

"I understand how late it is growing, and how many miles we have wandered from home, Tom," she retorted, with a smile so brilliant that his yearning gaze drooped before it as one turns from the sun. "If we don't want all the people turning out to hunt for us as lost or stolen, it is high time we were retracing our footsteps. And that is all I care to understand just now."

"But you won't hold a grudge! You'll forgive my ill-natured fling about your shooting?"

"On one condition; that you help me overcome my foolish fear of shooting, or, rather, of the smoke and fire and noise."

"Accepted, cheerfully. But why are you so bent on becoming a female sharpshooter, Ora? You may live to wear gray hairs before another such emergency arises."

"I will conquer my silly nerves! Think—what would he say?"

Was it malice? Was it a shot to punish his bit of impertinence? Tom half suspected this, yet he could not avoid stammering:

"You mean—you were thinking—"

"Of my hero—my Man With a Record, Captain Crisp!" cried Orabel, with a bright glow filling her glorious eyes, her queenly figure seeming to swell and grow more erect as she gazed far away over the plain.

"You are right, Miss Hilliard; I think it is quite time we were returning to your home," quietly uttered Tom, turning his steed and moving off at her side.

Silence had fallen over them both. Tom certainly had nothing to offer after that last speech, feeling as he did that it was intended as a sharp rebuke for his thoughtless quip. And Orabel seemed quite lost in a reverie that seemed as pleasant as it was deep.

It made no difference that their horses, knowing that they were homeward bound, passed from a walk to a trot and then into a steady, long-reaching gallop that carried them over the ground rapidly. Like one in a dream Orabel gazed steadily ahead of her, seeing naught of her actual surroundings, living only in a world of her own creation.

It was hard on the poor fellow riding beside her, and his face showed this only too plainly.

Perhaps it was because they were both so preoccupied that their horses turned to the left of the trail they had made in coming, taking the most direct route home. For a few miles this

led over the plain where there were no signs of a regular trail, but then entered a gradually widening trail that eventually crossed over a broad, shallow hollow or *coulee*, thick grown with tall grass and taller weeds, with here and there an occasional shrub or stunted tree.

Still in silence, still preoccupied, still lost to a proper consciousness of their surroundings, the couple rode into this *coulee*. And when they were at its middle, where the cover on either side rose almost to the level of their shoulders, a sharp report rent the air, and with a gasping, gurgling cry, poor Tom Allen flung up his arms, one hand striking against his head, then reeled and tumbled out of the saddle as his frightened steed leaped to one side.

With a wild shriek of terror, Orabel came out of dreamland only to see her friend fall before that treacherous shot—to see two rough-chinned men leap out from their ambush—to catch a glimpse of a whirling lasso and feel her horse abruptly checked in its terrified flight—and then to feel rude, harsh hands grasping her about the waist.

"Look to t'other critter, Sam!" her captor cried in harsh tones. "Ef it gits away to the ranch, they'll be ructions to pay! Choke it down, durn ye!"

Orabel recovered from her momentary stupor as the ruffian strove to lift her from the saddle, and with a wild scream for help, she resisted with all her strength. Poor girl! that was just indeed in comparison with the muscles in those rough arms, and she was torn from her seat with rude violence, the rascal growling as his hand clasped her white throat with vicious energy:

"Quit your squealin', pritty, or I'll give yo sech a huggin' as ye never got from ary one o' your high-toned loveyers, now, I tell ye!"

Panting, gasping, weak and unnerved, the poor girl ceased her struggles. And presently, like one in a dream, she heard her immediate captor call out to his fellow rascal:

"How is it, Sam? The fat cuss out o' his mis'ry?"

"Never you borry trouble on his a'count, Jim," was the coarse reply, accompanied by a chuckle. "He's too dead to skin!"

She heard no more, for her senses fled.

CHAPTER V.

"NERO FIDDLLED WHILE ROME WAS BURNING." EVEN in its usual, everyday appearance, Good Enough Ranch was far more agreeable to the outward eye than the vast majority of its kind.

The location itself was picturesque, the buildings constituting the ranch proper rising within easy distance of the trees which bordered the sweep of the "river" at the rear, while a few scattering ones rose about the house itself.

This was more like one of the low, cool, comfortable-looking dwellings peculiar to the planters of the Lone Star's elder sister States than the ordinary run of structures found on a cattle-raising ranch; but the original locater had been a man of taste, and while waiting for the time when he could have his son and daughter to live with him for the rest of his life, Morris Hilliard had added what charms he could think of. Now, alive with the voices of mirth and youth, Good Enough Ranch was indeed "good enough" for the most fastidious.

It seemed more than usually so on this afternoon—the same on which poor Tom Allen was so terribly mortified, to be followed by even worse. All about the ranch was life and activity, and a full score of human figures enlivened the level stretch of sward a little to the left and front of the main building.

Some were dashing swiftly back and forth, in easy curves and sharp circlings, while others sat their steeds in quiet, watchful waiting, but one and all keeping at least one eye turned toward a particular point.

Naturally, since there stood the young lady in whose honor this impromptu little circus was being given.

There were some who, in the school-days past and gone, spitefully hinted that Orabel Hilliard chose Mary Allen as her best friend more as a foil to her own brilliant beauty than for aught lovely or lovable in the quiet, unassuming girl they were not long in terming the nun. It could not be denied that Mary possessed qualities that made this title seem very appropriate, even then while she was but a girl, but of all her mates, Orabel learned to love her the best by far. And it was a love that grew and became more steadfast the longer their intimacy lasted.

"The Dove" would have been a more appropriate title, for there was something dove-like about Mary in her quietest moods. Not but what there was life enough—fire enough beneath the surface. On occasion the dove could ruffle its feathers and use her bill with vigor enough to defend herself and all her friends when assailed, but as a general thing she was still and placid, ever pleasant, ever with a demure smile on her lips or at least playing back in the depths of her deep blue eyes.

She seemed a trifle below the mean height of her sex, just now, as she stood beside tall Eugene Hilliard, watching the cowboys as they performed their difficult feats in the saddle. Her soft brown hair was put plainly away from her

broad, full brow. Her eyes were glowing, and the interest she plainly took in these wild, half-barbarous sports, lent them a deeper, more vivid blue, heightening the main charm of her rather plain face, for the time being rendering it almost beautiful. The same cause brought a touch of color to her face, seeming to fill out her usually thin cheeks almost to plumpness.

"We'd average up right nicely," Tom was wont to say when chance happened to bring them into sharp contrast, "but when nature balanced the books, she gave me all the fat and left Mary the bones!"

Somewhat exaggerated, as worthy Tom was prone to be whenever his abominated corpulence was touched upon, but even the eyes of love could not blind themselves to the fact that Mary Allen would look a little trimmer, more graceful, if there was just a suspicion more of plumpness about her figure. Her shoulders were a little too square, her arms too slender, her hands too thin and fingers long. All this was added to and emphasized by her provoking plainness of dress.

"If you would only let me fix you up a little, Mary!" Orabel would often exclaim, provoked. "I could make you look so charming, so—"

"Jackdaw-like," Mary would interpose with her soft, pleasant little laugh. "Let me be as I am, dear. Tom does the fretting for this family, and he grumbles and fights against fate enough for us both. All your cunning arts would fail to make me even good looking, so why should you try? If my friends are my friends, they will be glad to take me as I really am; if not my friends, I do not care to have them take me at all."

There was naught of pretense or of insincerity in this. Mary was in earnest and meant just what she said. And plain though she undeniably was, there was at least one man at Good Enough Ranch who clearly would not have her altered in the slightest—unless it was to make her manner toward him less sisterly, more love-like.

That was Eugene Hilliard, Orabel's step-brother, and co-heir with her to all the vast stretch of grazing land, all the herds of cattle and droves of horses and flocks of sheep of which Morris Hilliard died possessed.

A fine-looking young man, tall, dark, handsome, with the quick and smooth movements of one who has cultivated the powers with which nature gifted him, at least in a muscular sense. And never had Eugene Hilliard looked more handsome than he did on this eventful afternoon.

Always quick, lively, easily excited, entering into all things with a fire and dash that could accomplish wonders, on this day Eugene had been strangely restless even for him. It must have been something in the air, as he laughingly told Mary when she playfully charged him with so being; be that as it may, he was feverishly brilliant, turning from one thing to another with a fitful nervousness that at length drove Orabel to challenge Tom for a gallop over the prairie, in self-defense.

This did not effect a cure, as Mary laughingly observed, but as the time rolled on, his surplus energy took a shape far more agreeable to her, fond as she had grown of the wild, half-barbaric sports of the new life she found herself leading. At a word from him, the cowboys attached to that portion of the ranch assembled with their horses, and then displayed their skill in riding and with the lasso, performing feats of skill and daring such as few professional horsemen could even attempt to copy, let alone originate.

With that bright, happy face before them, with those great blue orbs kindling with enthusiasm and following their every motion, little wonder that "the boys" fairly outdid themselves. Next to their own queenly mistress, they worshiped this kindly stranger, and there was nothing of regret in their quick glances back and forth as they saw how closely Eugene Hilliard kept to her side, how eager he was to save her the slightest trouble, how full of love were his glowing eyes.

He made no secret of his devotion, either, and it seemed to grow more passionate and stronger with the quiet, ladylike resistance which he unexpectedly encountered.

That is the right word for it. Eugene, ever seeking amusement, had first taken notice of the quiet, demure, quaker-like little lady, with not even the ghost of an idea of playing the lover; he was a passionate admirer of the beautiful in nature as in art, and for the first two days he thought Mary actually ugly in face and form. But then, as she adroitly yet simply warded off his half mocking shafts, seeming so entirely unmoved, so wholly mistress of herself and her emotions, he grew more in earnest, more interested until at length, before he so much as suspected the truth, he found himself a captive to the lady with whom he had thought to simply amuse himself.

Like all handsome men, Eugene fully appreciated the advantages this gave him in the race for love. He knew that he was rich enough to satisfy the most exacting. He knew that Mary was poor in comparison, and though she had never given him the slightest grounds for thinking her in love with him, the young ranchero put

his fate to the test without the slightest misgivings as to the happy result. And that made the surprise all the greater.

For Mary Allen, instead of meeting him halfway, actually snubbed him! After a ladylike manner, of course—she could not be rude even to one whom she distrusted or disliked—but still so effectually that he fled from her presence without fairly uttering the momentous word. And from that day to the one under consideration, she had contrived to hold her passionate lover at a certain distance, with rare tact evading an open proposal which would have required an equally positive answer. And to save his life Eugene could not decide whether she loved him or not.

"You are almost as much an admirer of manly men as Orabel, little lady," laughed Hilliard, as Mary clapped her small hands in approval of an unusually dexterous feat. "I'm almost inclined to be jealous of Long Tom Deakin!"

"Why should you be, when you are such a fine horseman yourself?" was the innocent response, those great blue eyes giving him a swift, shy glance, then turning once more to the riders in front. "My enthusiasm is boundless, and I have applause for all that may deserve it, sir."

"Is that a hint, Mary?" he laughed. "If you choose to take it as such, yes," was the prompt reply. "I see your horse is saddled and ready. I know you are just aching to be one of the company. Not to show off your skill, of course," with a half-mocking bow that pointed her words.

"Before you I am, Mary," and his black eyes burned with a fire that caused her to suddenly turn hers away and move a little from his side. "You know why—you know how precious one word, one glance, one sign of approval from you would be to me. You know I live only to win your—"

"Esteem, which has been yours for ages, Mr. Hilliard, if only because of dear Ora?" was the swift interposition.

And then she was clapping her little hands in ardent applause to reward another difficult feat of horsemanship.

Thus it had ever been since he suffered the pangs of love, and Eugene Hilliard bit his red lip until it burned as though scorched by fire, struggling hard to keep down his rising passions, fighting against the mad impulse that bade him snatch her to his bosom and force her to speak the precious words for which he hungered.

He was strangely feverish that day, and seemed to distrust his self-control, for without a word he turned abruptly away, and putting a bent finger between his lips, blew a shrill whistle that called a sharp neigh from his gallant horse. With a toss of its proud head, the rein was plucked from the grasp of the cowboy who had him in charge, and the gallant black charger dashed up to its loved master, whickering joyously as it stopped short, its velvety muzzle touching the glowing cheek of the young ranchero.

Without touching foot to stirrup, Eugene Hilliard leaped into the saddle and sped in a swift circle around Mary Allen, then dashing off through the lane opened for him by the cowboys, all of whom fell back to give ample room for the display which they knew was to follow.

And even Lark Fuller, who was just then riding up on the wounded horse, was forced to admit that the young master of Good Enough Ranch was an admirable rider; himself a past master of the art, such praise was praise indeed.

"Take a man's rig, an' he'd clean the hull kit o' us out, an' give the old man a mighty tight rattle, you hear me?" declared Tom Deakin.

By "old man" he meant Lark Fuller, as he somewhat sheepishly admitted to Mary Allen, who chanced to overhear the speech and questioned him. And when the little lady put the big cowboy wholly at his ease, which she quickly accomplished by that peculiar knack of hers, he dilated freely on the skill of the foreman.

"The boys ain't none on 'em slouches, ma'am," he said earnestly. "They live by ridin', so to speak, an' so they hev to be pritty well up in it; but we're like a week-old calf 'longside a six-year bull, when it comes down to fine work sich as the ole man kin reel off, now I tell ye!"

Ever since then Mary had been eager to witness the foreman at his best in the saddle, though she had never met an opportunity for asking such until now, though she had had more than one pleasant conversation with the cross-eyed master of horse.

She was watching Eugene Hilliard putting his horse through his paces, but for all that she was conscious of the approach of the quiet foreman, and as he paused at a little distance without speaking, she turned toward him with sparkling eyes, her voice eager and pleading:

"I do so enjoy watching fine riding, Mr. Fuller!"

"I don't know a better judge, either ma'am, an' it takes a good rider to see the fine p'int in another's work in the saddle."

Mary flushed just a little, her eyes sparkling as she bowed her thanks for the direct compliment. Somehow she did not consider it as merely a compliment, this plain foreman was so

simple and direct. She felt that he meant just what he said, and she accepted it as such.

"I owe much of that skill to you, then, Mr. Fuller, for I know I have learned much from your advice since coming here. And now—if I might ask a favor?" she hesitated, with a shy, upward glance.

"Of me, ma'am?"

"I have heard so much of your skill in the saddle. They say you have no equal in this country at feats of adroitness and daring. And if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I would dearly like—"

It was strange how difficult she found it to explain herself under the calm, steady gaze of those gray eyes—she who was ordinarily so cool and self-possessed. Her eyes drooped before those crossed orbs and her voice grew lower, ending in an inarticulate murmur.

She did not see or hear Eugene Hilliard as he came dashing up to the spot. Was it because of this coming that Lark Fuller spoke so coolly, so carelessly?

"The boys shoot off their mouths mighty random sometimes, ma'am, an' I'd hate to take oath to all they kin say when they git onder good headway. I kin ride good enough to make my way when the trail ain't too crowded, but I reckon that's pritty nigh all."

"Yet the boys crack you up as a marvel, Lark!" laughed Hilliard, as he leaped lightly to the ground and turned his good horse loose. "They swear by your skill in the saddle and with the pistol. Suppose you give us a little sample of your style?"

Cold and impassive, the foreman listened to the young ranchero. And when Eugene turned carelessly from him, he replied quietly:

"Is that a order, boss? Ef it is, I'll git my critter an' do what I kin to please. I never set much store on fanfaronade."

"Not an order but a request, Mr. Fuller," quickly uttered Mary.

"Comin' from a lady, it 'mounts to pritty much the same thing," was the calm response, as Fuller turned on his heel and strode away.

Eugene laughed lightly at the look of half-pain, half-mortification which came into the girl's face at this brusque speech.

"A rough diamond, Mary, and even you can't polish it. A better man for his station I never knew, but his mind never rises above it."

Mary made no reply, though her downcast eyes were darkly luminous.

Lark Fuller did not keep them long waiting. He rode forth on a tall, strong, yet active half-bred horse, with no useless trappings about either the animal or himself. And then, silent, cool, business-like all over, he went through the prairie manual, performing the most intricate evolutions, the most difficult feats of strength and skill and adroitness, as caused Mary's cheeks to turn rosy, her great blue eyes to glow, and her breath to come quick and fast as she watched his motions. And before long, even Eugene Hilliard became to the full as deeply interested in the scene, for the moment forgetting all else as he watched.

In cold type it is difficult to paint such a picture.

At one time there were half a score cowboys all in motion, trying their best to pen him up and capture him with their lassoes, making his person their only mark, of course. And before ten minutes had elapsed, the last one of their number had been plucked from the saddle and rolled in the dust, this putting them out of the contest. And then, as a cap-sheaf, Lark Fuller swept past Long Tom Deakin, who lay in an awkward heap on the ground, like one dead or disabled. Swept past without in the least checking the speed of his horse, but bending far over in the saddle, grasping the body, and with a mighty heave lifting it clear of the ground and swinging it across the pommel before him.

He lightly lowered the cowboy to his feet, then rode up to where Mary and Eugene stood, saying quietly, without betraying fatigue or even quickening of the pulse:

"I don't want to tire ye out, an' I reckon that'll sarve fer a s'mple, boss, an' you, ma'am."

"Lark, old man, you're a terror!" exclaimed Hilliard, grasping his hand and shaking it vigorously. "I count myself tolerably good in the saddle, for an amateur, but I take off my hat to you!"

"It's the way I have o' makin' my chuck, ye know," calmly.

"It was glorious!" exclaimed Mary, her eyes aglow. "I thank you, Mr. Fuller—thank you with all my heart!"

"That's a mighty sight bigger wages than I ever made afore in the same len'th o' time, ma'am," with a low, not ungraceful bow.

Her eyes drooped, and the flush deepened on her cheeks. For one instant Lark Fuller gazed keenly into her face, then turned to Hilliard, cool, calm, respectful without being in the least obsequious.

"Ef they is anythin' more I kin do, sir, to please you or the lady, all I want is the word. I'm workin' fer wages, an' my time's journ to fill up as you take the notion."

"I don't know; after such wonderful riding, anything else would fall flat, I'm afraid," laughed the young ranchero.

"That's fer you to say, boss. It's my business to ride."

"But not to ride better than all others!" quickly uttered Mary, then blushing anew at her own impetuous speech.

"It's 'bout all I do know how to do, ma'am, an' it's a mighty poor stick that cain't do somethin' passably well. Ridin' come sort o' natural to me, I reckon, fer it's all I'm fit fer in this world."

Not a complaint, but a simple statement as of a well-known fact.

"Even if others would allow the truth of what you say, Mr. Fuller, you should still be proud, very proud! If I were a man, and could ride like that, I fear the world would be all too small for me!" and though she laughed while making the last assertion, there was an earnestness underlying her words that brought a faint flush to those bronzed cheeks, a sparkle into those crooked eyes.

Eugene, too, flushed, but it was with something akin to annoyance, if not actual jealousy. Not that he feared anything like love-making between his foreman and the lady, but his own love was so intense and exacting that it pained him to hear her praise another.

"Come, Miss Allen, it is time for your pistol lesson. The sun is getting low, and you need a good light."

"If I ever hope to become a sharpshooter, you mean?" with a little laugh. "I am almost discouraged, after the examples I have been set today by the men. It discourages me so! I make such slow progress!"

"You needn't be, ma'am," quietly interposed Lark Fuller. "I was lookin' at ye yest'day, an' fer a woman, you've got a mighty good eye. The only trouble is with your wrist an' arm. You won't let them do the work they'd order of themselves, an'—"

"You must have been taking pretty close notes, Fuller!" bluntly interjected Hilliard, his lip curling a trifle as he shot a keen glance into that homely face, so simple, so direct and honest.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I forgot I was talkin' to a lady," coldly uttered the foreman, drawing back and turning on his heel.

"And telling me more than I knew for all of your lessons, Mr. Hilliard," a little sharply uttered Mary, her blue eyes flashing. "I really don't care to take a lesson this evening—unless Mr. Fuller will go with us and give me the benefit of his experience."

But Lark Fuller either did not hear or did not care to show that the half-pleading speech had reached his ears. Leading his horse, he was striding toward the stable from whence he had taken it for the exhibition, when a faint, shrill cry startled him, even as it did the couple whom he had just left.

Far away, yet distinctly visible on that almost level stretch, they caught sight of a boy running rapidly toward them, swinging his arms wildly, shouting out words the meaning of which they could not catch.

But it was evident to all there that something unusual had occurred or was about to occur, and Lark Fuller at once leaped into the saddle, speeding away toward the runner, shouting out as he did so:

"Look to your critters an' weepers, lads! See that all's ready fer a charge or a fight. Somethin's bu'sted wide open, or Don wouldn't be cuttin' up them capers!"

Frightened, she scarcely knew what at, Mary Allen clung to the arm of her host, nor was her apprehensions lessened by feeling how violently that arm trembled beneath her grasp.

Involuntarily she glanced up into his face, and shrunk back as she saw how white and strained the features were!

"Oh, Eugene, what is the matter? What can have happened? Not—oh! something has happened to Ora and Tom—I know it!"

"Nonsense!" hoarsely muttered the young ranchero, his voice barely articulate. "What could happen to them? More likely the boy has been bitten by a snake—it *must* be that!"

They saw Lark Fuller reach the runner, stooping and snatching him up from the ground, then wheeling and racing back toward the ranch at breakneck speed. And a minute later he drew rein before them, dropping the boy to the ground, hastily muttering:

"Bad news he fetches, boss! Some hellhounds hev kerried off Miss Hilliard from Rattlesnake Coulee, a bit—"

"An' killed the fat senor, master! I seen it all—I did!" the panting lad spluttered, eager to have his full share in this new and unexpected sensation.

"My brother—my poor Tom!" gasped Mary, staggering.

CHAPTER VI.

"A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS."

"DURN this fine-haired breed o' wimmen, anyhow!" and Jim Farley fairly snorted with disgust as he felt the full weight of Orabel Hilliard taxing his strength of arm as her senses fled on hearing that brutal response. "Keeled over like a sick kitten, and pulls down like a chunk o' lead!"

"The less savvy, the less kickin' an' squealin'

an' scratchin', pard," chuckled the more philosophic villain as he rose from his hasty examination of their victim. "It comes heap cheaper'n tyin' an' gaggin' would, an' does jest as much good."

"Ef she ain't tryin' to play it low down onto us!" growled Farley, suspiciously. "They're mighty bad medicine, the best on 'em, an' a white man cain't never feel sure— What you doin' thar, pard?"

"Goin' through his clo'es," with refreshing frankness. "What he's got won't do him no good whar he's boun' fer, an' it takes oro fer to buy whisky these days."

"Don't hide any o' the dust so durned snug that you won't be able to 'count fer it when the right time comes, Sam!"

"Keep your linen on your back, pard," was the placid retort. "When we git whar we've got more time to waste, it'll be a whack-up on the dead level. I reckon you know your old pard?"

Possibly this was the very reason why Jim Farley felt dissatisfied with the present division of labor, but he also knew that they had a perilous contract on hand which required not only prompt action but perfect co-operation.

"I know he's a bloody fool ef he ever tries to play double on me, anyhow," was his sullen response. "Skin him clean, then boost him out o' the trail; tote him in the bresh, an' sorter kiver up the bloody marks. We don't want to leave too plain a trail ahind us. They do say that durn Lark Fuller is good as they make 'em when it comes to sech work, an' it be little ole h—l ef he was to jump us afore we kin git our keards stocked jest right—now wouldn't it?"

"Mighty right you be, Jimmy," puffed Sam Leffler as he lifted the limp, lifeless body of their victim in his sturdy arms and carried it into the tangled weeds.

Jim Farley lowered his fair burden to the ground, his anxiety clearly increased by the fear to which he had just given expression, for he ran back until he could glance over the edges of the *coulee* and scan the prairie for nearly a mile in every direction. An oath of relief escaped his lips as he failed to discern aught to confirm his fears, and he hastily retraced his steps.

All too soon for poor Orabel, who had partially recovered from her brief insensibility, and even then was striving to regain her feet, to mount her horse and dash away to carry the terrible news to Good Enough Ranch.

"Not much ye don't, my pritty!" grated the ruffian as he dashed forward and grasped the maiden, adding with savage viciousness as she shrieked at the top of her voice: "Hold your hush, gal, or it will be all the wuss fer you in the end!"

"Too much talk, pard," and Sam Leffler was scowling darkly as he came out of the weeds where he hurriedly dropped poor Tom Allen at the sudden outcry. "Ef she won't shut off steam no other way, I reckon she will ef you clap our patent stopper on!"

His fingers were even more nimble than his tongue, and as he spoke he was twisting an old handkerchief into a gag that a few moments later took the place of the broad, dirty palm which covered the red lips. And then, for the second time, the poor girl's overtaken senses gave way and she sunk a lifeless weight on the strong arms of her brutal captor.

"Be durned ef it won't be wuth all the oro we're like to git out o' the job, an' more, too!" growled the surly ruffian as he passed his fair burden over to his fellow rascal, then mounted the horse recently ridden by luckless Tom Allen.

"Pass the critter up to me, pard, and then fetch out our own critters. You'll hev to lead the lot, fer it won't do to run any resks that we kin smooth over. 'Tain't no baby-play we've tackled this bout!"

"It's ketchin' afore hangin', though, pard," grinned Leffler, whose nerves appeared of a steadier or more sluggish nature than those of his fellow sinner, as he plunged once more into the weeds, to quickly return with two horses ready for the road.

Mounting one of these, he led the other, in company with the fine animal recently ridden by Orabel Hilliard, following close at the heels of his comrade who supported the insensible maiden on the saddle before him. They both drew rein when once fairly clear of the *coulee*, and cast keen, searching glances in every direction, but without detecting aught to arouse their suspicions.

And yet keen eyes were upon them. Lying beneath a little clump of grass and weeds on the high prairie, the half-breed boy whom the young master of Good Enough Ranch had dubbed Don Sancho Pedro, was watching their movements with breathless interest, and as they turned their backs once more toward him, he crept away like a snake, flattened out on the ground, his person half-covered with the handfuls of dry grass and weeds which he had so nervously torn up. And then, when fairly beyond the swell of the prairie, he rose to his feet and raced swiftly on to Good Enough Ranch to tell the startling story.

Of all this the kidnappers were blissfully unconscious, and as their good horses carried them

further and further on their way, they laughed and joked and interchanged congratulations with each other.

"Slick as grease, pard!" chuckled Sam Leffler. "Who says we ain't the boss workers from Laborville?"

"Ef it goes on as smooth, Sam!"

"Why fer shouldn't it, pard? Hain't it a dead—"

A warning hiss from the other ruffian cut short the speech. As he supported Orabel in his arms, he felt the quiver of returning consciousness, and he was not quite ready for her to enter upon the secret reasons for her abduction.

The poor girl opened her eyes and glanced bewilderedly around as though for the time being at a loss to account for her presence there in the open air, but as her gaze alighted upon that grim, rough, bearded face above hers, she shrunk back with a shiver of terror and disgust, the whole frightful truth flashing upon her brain.

"Now don't you go to hev'n' fits, pritty!" hastily muttered Jim Farley, tightening his grip on her waist as though expecting an effort to fling herself to the ground. "It ain't nigh so bad as it mought be, an' ef you try to act sensible, you won't be none the wuss fer this little rumpus. I'm givin' it to ye straight, honey!"

"You murdered him—poor Tom!" gasped Orabel, shuddering violently as she recalled those dreadful words which had first deprived her of her senses.

Jim Farley laughed coarsely.

"You mean the fat cuss as was ridin' 'long of ye, pritty? Don't you go into high-strikes 'long o' him, fer it 'll all be powder wasted ef ye do. Murder nothin'! He's jest as live an' wide-awake as you be this minit, honey!"

"But I heard—I saw him fall! I saw the blood!"

"Jest a rap on the cabeza that may make it ache a bit fer a few hours, nothin' wuss than that," was the cool response. "We creased the fat critter, so he wouldn't make trouble with our plans. He ain't dead. He was all alive when we left him in the *coulee*, tied up so it 'll take him an hour or so to set hisself free, but no ways to hurt. I'm tellin' you honest, little gal. Fer why should I lie to you?"

But his very anxiety to quiet her fears but rendered them the more acute, though Orabel, gradually regaining something of her wonted nerve and self-control, said nothing.

"An' as fer you," continued Farley, his tones still more placable, "they ain't nothin' so awfully horrible ahead, ef you act like a lady should, an' don't make us no more trouble then you kin help. We ain't quite so high-toned an' stuck up as the comp'ny you're best used to consortin' with, but thar's a heap sight wuss critters in the world then Sam 'nd me, ef we're treated half way white. Ef I tied up your mouth back thar, it was only to keep you from kickin' our settin' over afore we could hatch out our chickens. An' didn't I even it up by takin' the stopper off as soon as you went fainty, like?"

"Which it'll hev to go back ag'in ef you tune up your pipes too lively, ma'am," chuckled Sam Leffler, holding the dirty rag up where she could not avoid seeing it and divining its purpose.

"But long as you act decent, you won't be bothered that way," seriously added Farley. "It ain't much funder we hev to ride afore we come to the stoppin'-place we've picked out to lay low in while the light lasts. 'Have yourself ontel we git to the timmer, yender, an' then we'll hev a good talk-it-over to see ef we cain't come to some 'rangement which 'll give us all what we stan' the most in need of."

Orabel Hilliard made no response to this speech. She was rapidly recovering from the stunning shock which the sight of poor Tom Allen falling from his horse as if in death had given her. She was only too glad to catch at the blunt explanation given by her captor, for any hope was better than none. If Tom was living, she felt that she could far better endure whatever fate these ruffians might have in store for her.

She glanced from one to the other through her drooping lids, trying to mentally sum them up, but with precious little to encourage her. They were not only rough and ragged, but villainously brutal in feature as well.

Of the two she felt the most dread of Jim Farley, in whose arms she was forced to lie, though to the outward eye he was much less ugly and degraded than Sam Leffler.

Farley was tall and wiry, his head and face covered with a tangle of jetty black hair, coarse and straight almost as that of an Indian. His nose was hooked, his eyes small, deep set and planted close together, glowing at times with a treacherous, poisonous light that reminded one of a venomous serpent. His movements were quick and supple, and with his over-shifting glances, it would be no slight task to catch him off his guard.

Sam Leffler was almost the exact opposite of his fellow rascal, in all save natural wickedness assiduously cultivated. Short and squat in figure, with enormously broad shoulders, he seemed a Hercules cut down. His head was red, and his face was redder even than the coarse hair

which covered the greater portion of it. His eyes were red, in streaks, his tones hoarse, husky, coming through a throat roughened by bad whisky. In every item he seemed the low, degraded rascal, yet Orabel would have turned to him in preference had she been forced to choose between her two captors. He was all brute; Jim Farley was largest part devil.

She mechanically glanced ahead of them when Jim Farley mentioned his intention to seek a stopping-place in which to lie low until the shades of night came to cover their movements, and her heart gave a curious little jump as she recognized the timber island out of which the mad bull had charged them only a brief period before. Here it was that the kidnappers meant to seek refuge.

A brief gallop carried them to the *motte*, and while Sam Leffler was taking the led horses under cover to secure them out of sight, Jim Farley stood erect in his stirrups and cast steady, searching glances about them, like one who is determined not to be caught off his guard.

"Not that I reckon thar's much danger o' any o' your folks comin' this way fer the time we want to hold fort, pritty," he said, with a grim laugh as Orabel also glanced hurriedly around them. "Ef you want to sleep good this night, you'd better pray your prittiest that none on 'em don't meander this way!"

Not much in the words, but far too much in the tone and the hard smile which bore it company. Orabel shivered as she listened, and was thankful for the reappearance of Sam Leffler, into whose arms the taller ruffian surrendered her while he alighted from his steed.

"Tote her in to kiver, pard; my arms is cramped all up."

"Which mine never was yit with too big a dose o' prittiness," the red ruffian chuckled, smacking his lips suggestively as he plunged into the cover, coming to a halt near the center of the *motte*, where the undergrowth had in a measure been choked out by the trees keeping the sunlight from the soil.

"It's business, not mashin', we're on this trip, pard," uttered Jim Farley with grim significance. "Don't you fergit that!"

Leffler received the rebuke with a grin, but made no response. He lowered Orabel to the ground, when she was immediately taken in charge by the taller ruffian, who led her to the foot of a tree and said:

"Fast bind, fast find, pritty! Ef you'll be so kind an' condescendin' as to take a seat right here, I'll see that you don't tumble over an' scratch that sweet face o' yourn ef ye happen to drap asleep onawar's, like."

One glance into those glittering black orbs told Orabel the worse than folly of resisting, and without a word she sat down with her back against the tree-trunk. Farley took a stout cord from one of his pockets and passed it around her waist, tying the ends on the further side of the trunk.

"I'm monstrous glad you show sech rare good sense, pritty," he said in softer tones, as he came around and stood in front of his fair captive, watching her face keenly. "It gives me new hopes that you an' we two kin come to 'rangements without so much trouble, after all."

"What is it you demand?" slowly uttered Orabel, forcing herself to encounter his gaze without flinching.

"That's a long story, pritty," was the deliberate response as one of his hands rose and began tugging at his coarse beard. "A monstrous long story, but one which mebbe you'll hev to listen to afore you go to sleep this night, whether it pleases ye or not."

"Wouldn't it sarve jes' to give her the juice?" suggested Sam Leffler, who stood watching them both with an owlish gravity. "Wouldn't it do jes' as much good as to rake up the hull pile, pard? It's the *oro* we want, after all, ye know?"

"Not more'n revinge!" sharply cried the taller ruffian, turning on his comrade in evil with a savage glitter in his eyes. "It's more'n gold to me, this work is. It's the gittin' even fer what happened years ago that makes it taste sweetest to me!"

"Revenge is good enough when it comes while the feelin' is red-hot an' still a-heatin'," philosophically observed Leffler, "but revinge won't pay fer whisky an' sich, while ducats will. Make sure o' them, an' then do the talkin' ef ye've got time to waste, says I!"

"I don't ax you to listen, pard," coldly retorted Farley. "You kin go out to the aidge an' keep a eye open fer 'truders. I don't want to make a run fer it now, but ef you see anybody follerin' the trail we left, don't go to sleep afore you pass the word this way."

"Jes' as you say, Jim," was the placid reply. "You wanted to run the circus, an' I'm only a roustabout fer the trip. You do the talkin' an' I'll do the outside work. So-long!"

He slouched away through the undergrowth, and Jim Farley filled and lighted his pipe before speaking again. Then, squatting on his heels before the maiden, he spoke rapidly through one side of his mouth without the trouble of removing his pipe, punctuating his sentences with puffs of blue, vile-smelling smoke.

"This ain't done jest fer the fun of it, as mebbe you've made up your mind to, pritty. It's business, chuck-up! Business, mixed up with a consid'able sprinklin' of revinge fer wrongs that was piled mount'in high on two low-down critters, by a fine high-an'-mighty gentleman who writ himself down as Morris Hilliard, Esquire!"

"My poor father!" ejaculated Orabel, turning paler than ever.

"That same, pritty," nodded Jim Farley, with an ugly glitter in his black eyes and a quicker pulling at his pipe. "Not nigh so poor as he would 'a' bin ef he hedn't died so soon. Not nigh so poor as his son an' daughter 'll be when I've squared a'counts with them fer the debts thar pap owed me an' my pard, Sam Leffler!"

"They ain't a soul in sight, an' I reckoned I could stan' it to listen a bit, pard," chuckled the worthy just named, coming through the undergrowth with a silence remarkable in one of his broad and seemingly clumsy frame.

Jim Farley did not seem to notice him in the least, but with his eyes riveted on the pale, anxious face of his prisoner, he added:

"Mebbe it ain't jest right to make you pay fer the doin's which I don't reckon you ever hearn of afore this day, pritty, but they's a good many folks as has to suffer wrongs done by other people, an' I guess you kin stan' the pressure as well as the next."

"What is it you mean to do? What is it you expect to gain by this outrage?" demanded Orabel, with a sudden burst of courage.

"A stake that'll keep us in drink an' chuck fer the winter, no matter how hefty we hit the bottle," chuckled Leffler, smacking his lips.

"Somethin' like that, yes," admitted Farley, in calmer tones as he made an impatient gesture toward his comrade. "But I ain't come to that p'int yit. Afore then I want to show ye jest how it comes we 'tarmined to make this break. I want you to know jest what sort o' game that dear old dad of yourn played onto us two pore critters when we wasn't able fer ter fight him back."

"I will listen to nothing against my sainted father!"

"You cain't well help yourself, pritty," with a short, hard laugh as the evil light deepened in his eyes. "Ef you kick too hard, I'll clap a hamper on your hoofs. If you try to out-talk me, I'll put a patent stopper on your clapper. But ef you show good sense, I'll make the story short as I comf'tably kin, an' the agony 'll be over all the quicker fer you. Which is it, pritty?"

While he spoke, Orabel was busy thinking. She saw how helpless she was, and realized not only the folly of resistance, but felt that she might incur still worse should she thoroughly anger these brutal ruffians. And so, trying to make the best of a bad matter, she said:

"Rather than that, I will hear you. But if you accuse my sainted father of wrong doing—if you charge him with injustice to even such as you—I brand you in advance as cowardly liars!"

When she started to speak, Orabel had no intention of going so far as this, but the words escaped her lips before she could check or alter them, and now she made the best of it. She steadily met the glowing gaze of her chief captor, and finally his eyes turned away, a short laugh parting his bearded lips.

"She's a good one!" chuckled Sam Leffler. "But I reckon we kin fetch her to her oats, pard Jim?"

Farley made no answer to this observation, but turned again to the maiden, speaking rapidly, with a smothered savageness that caused her blood to run cold in her veins, though she still managed to show a bold and unmoved front.

"Fu'st off I thought I could make you understand how much we two critters was wronged by your dead dad, an' so make it easier fer us to come to tarms; but ef you're so dead sot ag'in' puttin' faith in the flat truth jest because it shows up some crookedness in your pap, mebbe it would be a waste o' time to tell the story in detail."

"I am listening," was the calm interjection. "I am rather anxious to hear your story, if only the better to show its base falsity."

"A woman critter all over!" chuckled Leffler, with an owlish leer at the flushed, lovely face of their captive. "She wants to drink in the truth jest so she kin prove it a lie! Do it, too, you bet! Any woman kin do that, an' not hafe try!"

Farley turned abruptly upon his discursive partner, saying:

"Go out an' take a good long look 'round the locate, pard. Fu'st you know we'll be jumped by some o' them durn fri'nds o' hern. Then it'll be good-by lush an' chuck—you hear me?"

Sam Leffler crept silently away, sending back a leer and wink at Orabel, then tapping his lips with one stumpy forefinger as though warning her not to cross his mate with too many words. So at least Orabel interpreted the gesture, and a ray of hope flashed across her heart. If the worst came to the worst, she began to think she might gain something by appealing to the squat Hercules.

"Never mind how we come to be at outs,

pritty," coldly resumed Jim Farley, puffing stolidly at his pipe, his black eyes fixed on the face of his captive. "'Nough that Morris Hilliard got down onto us both, an' when we was the wu'st fixed fer provin' our innocence, he hed us jerked up an' railroaded into the jug! Fer what? Fer nothin', 'cept he wanted us out o' the way to keep us from spreadin' a story that mought 'a' sent him up to a limb or out of the kentry atween two days! Jest that; but it was enough."

"He was well heeled, an' could pay fer the evidence he wanted the most. He did pay—pay so well that they wasn't a soul who would listen to what we brung forward in self-defense. Not one but hollered amen! when we was sent to the jug fer more years than a man likes to lose right out of the middle of his life. An' we hed to go. But when we went, Sam an' me, we swore a bitter black oath fer to git even ef either one o' us lived to sarve out our sentence an' draw the breath o' freedom ag'in. We did live through it. We did come out ag'in. An' the fu'st use we made of our liberty was to j'ine hands an' renew the bitter black oath we tuck when they shet the prison doors onto us."

"That oath renewed, we set out to find our man. It didn't take long to meet our fu'st back-set. He was gone, nobody knowed jest whar. But he owed us too much fer us to drap the s'arch in a hurry. We went here an' we went thar, makin' our livin' the best we knowed how, but never losin' sight of our main p'int night nur day. We was boun' to have the critter ef he was in this world!"

"You know whar we found him, pritty. In the grave. Too fur gone fer us to hurt him, in his own self. But then we found out he hed left others ahind him who mought be as willin' as they was able to pay the debts owed by thar father: you 'nd your brother, pritty!"

He paused to renew the vile tobacco in his pipe, but Orabel kept silence.

His tone sharper and clearer, Jim Farley resumed:

"You kin guess now what it means, our watchin' fer you an' puttin' that fat fool out o' the way while we froze onto you. Ef you cain't I kin putt you on the right trail with a precious few words."

"It means that sence we cain't take pay fer the years we lost, out o' the hide of Morris Hilliard, we're goin' to hev big pay for them! It means that we've got you in our grip, an' we 'low to freeze to you ontel your brother comes down with a big pile o' ducats! When he pays us down on the nail, you kin go free as air, ontel we make up our minds ef we hain't bin too ginerous in settin' our damidges. Ef we think so, on a sober 'sideration, then we'll try to rig another purchase, mebbe on your brother, jest as the best chainece offers. Is that plain enough?"

Orabel made no reply. Truly, it was plain enough!

Jim Farley laughed shortly, hardly, then added:

"You don't want to commit yourself, eh? All right. I ain't crowdin' of ye. It's all fixed but the payin' over, an' nothin' you could say would change it one mite."

"Mebbe you're thinkin' of your fri'nds back at the ranch. Mebbe you're thinkin' we're almighty idjits fer stoppin' so nigh your home with our prize. Mebbe you're hopin' them same fri'nds'll come this way an' make it monstrous sultry fer us two speckulators. Ef so, you're in a turrible pore business!"

"Say they was to come, how much better off would you be?—you, the da'ter of the man ag'in' whom we swore that bitter black oath o' revinge! Wuss, a mighty heap, pritty! We'd try our level best to stand the gang off, but ef they was too hefty fer me 'nd Sam, we'd use a knife on your dainty white throat, an' then peel out fer our ha'r. They might git you back 'ithout payin' the price we've fixed on in our minds, but you wouldn't hev any fun in spendin' the ducats saved by it—no!"

Orabel shivered afresh, there was such devilish malignance in the glowing eyes of the ruffian as he uttered this thinly veiled threat.

Jim Farley was watching her changing countenance closely, and a grim smile curled his mustache as he read her thoughts aright. And he gave no signs of either surprise or delight as she spoke out:

"If money is all, you shall have it in abundance. Only set me at liberty, that I may hasten aid to the poor gentleman whom you mur—"

"I told you oncet that the fat critter was all hunky," coldly uttered Farley, as Orabel abruptly cut her words short, fearing to stir him to vicious anger. "He'll keep fer a day or two, ef we cain't come to tarms no sooner. He kin live on his fat, I reckon," and he laughed shortly at the grim idea.

"Set me at liberty, and name your price," earnestly uttered Orabel, after a brief pause. "I pledge you my honor the sum you demand shall be paid without question or attempt to arrest you!"

There was a crackling in the undergrowth and Sam Leffler returned from his lookout, glancing quickly from one to the other, then saying:

"Clar as a whistle fresh 'iled with the best benzine in the market, pard! Not a soul in sight, an' the sun hurryin' up to git home fer supper an' a snooze! You two critters made it all up, yit?"

"She's figgered it all out, she has!" and Jim Farley laughed contemptuously as he flitted the stem of his foul pipe toward the captive. "We're to set her loose, give her ther critter, let her ride over to the ranch to fetch us back the ducats. We're to stop here ontel she comes back with 'em, pard."

The red ruffian stared open-mouthed at his partner in evil, his red eyes widely distended, the very personification of wondering disgust. The matter-of-fact tones used by his mate deceived even him.

"You ain't sech a durned idjit as all that comes to, Jim Farley!" he spluttered, only to break into a laugh as he divined the truth. "Be durned ef you didn't skeer me nigh out o' my linen, pard! Fer a breath I tuck yer gulf fer scan'alous truth, I jes' *did*!"

"But she takes oath she means it all, pard," grinned Farley.

"She'd do it, too, wouldn't she? Oh, sart'in! She wouldn't tell her hot-headed brother right whar we was waitin' like lambs fer the sacker-fee! She wouldn't let him roust out his cowboys an' come here lickety-brin'le, hot fer our skelps! She wouldn't—no, she *wouldn't*, pard!"

The ruffians laughed boisterously as they dwelt on the utter ridiculousness of the idea, and never a word ventured Orabel in self-defense. Instead, she fairly bit her red lips until they turned still redder with flowing blood to keep back the words that rose in her throat—words that would have betrayed the sudden hope that had leaped into life!

For even as the ruffians rung the changes on her unbusiness-like proposition, she became aware of the presence of at least one other human being in the timber island. A sound, faint and indistinct, was the first intimation she had of this, and though it might have been caused by an animal, a rabbit or a wolf, perhaps, something told her different.

She felt fully assured that the sound was caused by the cautious advance of a human being who wished to see without first being seen, and she felt that this promised great things for her. If only those vile rascals would not also catch the same sounds!

How intently she listened! How she held her breath, and even strove to stop the tumultuous throbbing of her poor heart, lest they should hear it and take warning from its excitement!

And then—her heart leaped into her throat as she heard that sound, closer, plainer. And she almost shrieked aloud as she saw the two kidnappers spring to their feet and clap hands on their weapons as they glared savagely into the undergrowth, clearly having caught the same sounds that electrified her. But they were evidently deceived as to the quarter from whence it proceeded, as their faces were turned in a direction almost opposite the right one. And then—

There came a sharp explosion, and with a horrible screech of bitter agony, Sam Leffler reeled, blood dyeing his face still redder!

CHAPTER VII.

PLUCKY, IF UNLUCKY.

SOMETHING perilously near an oath came through the clinched teeth of Lark Fuller as his strong fingers caught at the throat of the half-breed boy, but he was too late to check that hasty speech. His left hand flung the lad aside, while he leaned far over in the saddle and sought to catch the falling form of the stricken sister. But swift as were his motions, Eugene Hilliard forestalled them.

"It is not so, dear Mary! It is all a foolish mistake. Tom is well, and I'll prove it to you in a very few minutes, if—"

"Save her—save him—if you love me!" came gaspingly from the pale lips of the maiden as she struggled to free herself from that close, passionate embrace.

Had he felt sure those words were addressed to himself, Lark Fuller could not have acted more promptly or with greater decision. He touched his horse with the spur and swept down to where Don Pedro had retreated, dolefully rubbing his bruised knees, and snatched him up to the pommel of his saddle. Then he hurriedly called out to Long Tom Deakin and his worthy mates:

"Pick ten men, Tom, and follow after me. Come ready for hard ridin' or hard fightin'. It's more'n likely you'll hev a taste o' both afore you see Good Enough Ranch ag'in!"

"We'll all go, boss!" cried one excited fellow, but Lark Fuller checked his horse and turned in the saddle as he lifted a warning hand, his voice ringing out peremptorily:

"No, you won't all go! No more than ten, Long Tom. The rest must stop here to see that no harm comes to the ranch itself. Who knows what devilment there is in the wind? Ten men to follow me, no more. Make fer the crossin' at Rattlesnake Coulee, whar I'll wait fer yel!"

The last words came floating back to their ears as Lark Fuller sped away over the plain

in the direction from whence the ill-news had come, one hand tightly gripping the half-scared half-breed lad.

"How was it, Don?" the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch asked as they sped swiftly along. "No fancy touches, but the plain truth, as you hope for Mother Mary to overlook your sins while in the flesh!"

He spoke in the lad's native language with a purity that seemed an additional claim on the love of the Mexican lad, cast among those who both hated and despised the very name of a "Greaser." And when he spoke in that tongue, little fear that Don Sancho Pedro would ever deny Lark Fuller aught in his power to grant.

"It is true, just as I said to you, senor," was the hasty response, his great black eyes turning up until they could gaze fairly into those crooked gray orbs. "I was coming past the head of Rattlesnake Coulee, when I saw the senorita and *El Senor Gordo*, riding together."

"Never mind that, Don, but come down to the shooting. You are certain you didn't get frightened at nothing? If you have—if you have brought a false report in to scare the life out of that lady—I'll warrant you a fine laced jacket from the master."

"To you I say it, senor, and Mary Mother hears me speak," was the earnest reply. "The mistress and the fat gentleman were riding close together. It looked as though they were very happy. I know it made me think we were destined to have a grand *festa* some of these days, be—"

Those sinewy fingers gripped the lad's shoulder with significant force, as Lark Fuller sharply muttered:

"Stick to the point, Don, and never mind your fancies. You saw the shot fired? You saw those hell-hounds carry her off?"

"I heard the shot, and in a little I saw the blue smoke, senor," the lad said, seemingly resolved to stick to the actual facts of the case. "I saw the fat senor throw up his hands and fall from his saddle. I saw his horse start off as though frightened, only to be checked by a riata. I saw an ugly ladrone arrest the senorita and tear her from the saddle, and then I dared look no longer for fear they might catch a glimpse of poor me."

"You could think of yourself, then, Don?"

"For her sweet sake, master," simply responded the lad, truth filling his lustrous eyes as they glanced upward. "If Pedro died, who would carry word to you of her peril?"

"She shall know it all, boy, and thank you with her own sweet voice for being the prime means of saving her from—I dread to guess what! There were only two, you say?"

"Only two, master, that I saw. I lay covered with a wisp of grass until the ladrones rode away from the coulee, one of them bearing the senorita before him on his horse, the other leading the extra animals. Then, as soon as I could do so without fear of being discovered, I crept back over the rise and carried the sad news to you, senor."

Lark Fuller asked no more questions just then, for his keen eyes were busy with an object ahead of them, just appearing above the gentle swell in the prairie that side of Rattlesnake Coulee.

Back at the Good Enough Ranch all was bustle and confusion for a brief space after the hasty dash of the foreman. The cowboys were one and all eager to be among those selected by Long Tom Deakin, and for a few minutes their conflicting claims almost set that veteran wild. And while he was struggling to bring order out of confusion, Eugene Hilliard was striving to soothe Mary Allen and to lead her back to the house where he could place her in charge of the housekeeper.

The first part was not so difficult. Mary came of good, true stock that had turned out more than one sturdy fighter by sea and by land, and with a desperate effort she banished the sickening dizziness born of that terrible announcement. She forgot herself, forgot all save that her brother, her sole remaining relative, was dead, dying, or at least in sore need of assistance. And this she was determined to afford in person, though Eugene strove hard to dissuade her.

"I cannot, I will not permit you to run the risk, Mary," he passionately uttered, his dark eyes all aglow. "If aught should happen to you my peace of mind would be forever destroyed! Stay here, and rest assured that we will do all that can be done for poor Tom."

"I must go—I will go to him!" Mary uttered with low but resolute voice. "He is my brother—all I have left on earth to love and care for me. I would die, were I to remain here idle while he may need me so sorely! I will go. If you refuse—"

She freed her arms and sped toward the bustling men, crying:

"My horse—or lend me one of yours! I must go to my brother!"

She caught at the nearest bridle, and would have sprung into the saddle, had not Eugene again caught her arm, saying:

"If you are determined—"

"Nothing shall prevent me from going!" and there was an intense light in her eyes such as had never been seen before, never suspected them of being capable of showing until that moment.

"You shall go, Mary, since you so wish it, though I could wish you were more reasonable."

"Is this a time for reason?" she almost bitterly cried, her eyes flashing. "My poor brother murdered! And I here, checked, hampered by one who pretends to— Men, who will take pity on a poor girl whose heart is breaking with suspense! Who will get my horse and—"

"I will, Mary," and Eugene Hilliard dashed rapidly away to the stable, quickly returning with a spotted pony, saddled and ready for the road.

Meanwhile Long Tom Deakin had succeeded in bringing order out of chaos, and was now riding rapidly at the head of ten men along the trail left by Lark Fuller, whose good horse had already carried him out of sight behind the distant swell.

Eugene Hilliard lifted Mary Allen into the saddle, then vaulted upon his own horse, riding close beside the agitated maiden, one strong hand grasping her bridle-rein.

"It was for your own good that I tried to persuade you to remain at the house and suffer us to do the work," he muttered, anxiously watching the varying emotions imprinted on that pale face. "Though I firmly believe that little rascal wildly exaggerated, and that we will find both Tom and Ora well and safe, it is barely possible that there may be some danger, and—"

"He is my brother, she my dearest friend," was the brief, almost cold interjection.

It was enough to chill the lover, ardent though he was, and from that period they rode on in silence, following a moderate distance behind the party led by Long Tom Deakin.

Still further ahead they could catch occasional brief glimpses of Lark Fuller and Don Sancho Pedro, racing on like mad. And at one of those brief intervals, they beheld the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch rise high in his stirrups, shading his eyes with one hand from the red beams of the declining sun, then drop the Mexican lad to the ground as he dashed forward at redoubled speed.

And they could just catch a faint echo of his voice as it rolled back over the prairie, to be caught up and repeated by half a score throats under lead of Long Tom Deakin.

"What is it—what does it mean?" faltered Mary Allen, her voice faint and trembling with apprehension.

"I don't know," slowly responded Eugene, his face well nigh as pale and anxious as that of the woman he loved so madly. "Lark sees something—perhaps it is Tom and Orabel!"

"May kind heaven grant it!" fervently ejaculated Mary, doubling her reins and using them as a whip to urge on her pony.

What was it that Lark Fuller saw?

There had been many mistaken statements made concerning poor Tom Allen that eventful afternoon.

Sam Leffler had declared him "too dead to skin," and when he uttered that verdict, he fully believed he was telling the plain truth.

Jim Farley had declared with seeming sincerity to Orabel Hilliard that instead of murdering her companion in that ill-starred ride, they had only stunned him by a "crease shot." There was more of truth in this assertion than the dark ruffian knew when he uttered it.

Instead of being slain outright by that treacherous shot from ambush, Tom Allen was only stunned, the lead, fairly enough delivered and at such short range, by one of those peculiar chances which can never be satisfactorily described, glancing from its direct course, only tearing its way through the scalp, causing a profuse hemorrhage and an insensibility that resembled death so closely as to deceive that experienced assassin, Sam Leffler.

It is barely possible that he might have discovered his mistake before leaving the body in the weeds which filled Rattlesnake Coulee, had he not been so hurriedly recalled by the scream and attempted escape of Orabel Hilliard, as already described. Thanks to this, Tom Allen was left to recover his consciousness, which he did not long after the two bold kidnappers rode off with their lovely prize.

With a feeble groan and vacant stare, poor Tom sought to arise, for the first few moments wholly at a loss to account for his presence in that rankly weeded retreat. All was a dizzy, whirling, chaotic blank with him for a space, and when his memory did begin to return, it went back to his exciting brush with the rogue bull. He glared around him as though expecting to again behold that ugly brute charging him with horns set for impaling.

He struggled to arise, when the exertion set his wound to bleeding afresh, the hot fluid filling his eyes and momentarily blinding him. And then, bit by bit the truth came back to him. Only up to the moment when he caught a brief glimpse of an evil face glaring at him over a leveled rifle. After that all was a terrible blank.

He thought of Orabel. He huskily uttered her name, scarcely able to recognize his own voice. He listened, then called again, louder, clearer. But there came no answer. And a terrible, heart-sickening dread at once took complete possession of him.

If she did not answer, it must be because she could not. She was dead—those fiends had murdered—

Not even to himself could poor Tom finish that frightful sentence.

With a strength which nothing less urgent could have lent him then, Tom Allen rose to his hands and knees, groping dizzily about for what he dreaded most to discover. But he failed to find the frightful evidence of his fears, and finally crept out into the trail where the pool of blood showed the spot on which he had fallen. That awful dread again assailed him, but not for long. At that point the ground was damp and soft, and brushing the blood from his eyes, he managed to distinguish the impress of his head and one broad shoulder. This told him from whose veins that blood had flowed.

Feeling his strength failing, his brains growing more and more unsteady, Tom forced himself to pause in his dreadful search. He clasped his throbbing temples with his trembling hands, forcing himself to think coherently.

He now felt that evil of some sort other than death had befallen the woman he loved far better than he did his own life. He felt that an hour lost might make all the difference between rescue and captivity. And he knew that on his strength and perseverance all this must depend.

"It's for her, for Orabel!" he muttered huskily, forcing back that deathly faintness. "I must be strong—I must keep going—I must not fail until I've warned her brother—until they know all!"

The very intensity of this thought helped him to carry it out. It cleared his brain sufficiently for him to realize that the steady flow of blood from his wounded scalp was weakening him greatly. And as the first step he set about checking this.

He scratched up a handful of sticky mud from the trail, plastering it over the throbbing furrow through his scalp, then bound the novel poultice in place with a sleeve torn from his shirt. And even before this was completed, he began to feel revived. The mud kept the blood from flowing, and its coolness seemed to partially drive the fever back from his aching brains.

He could think more coherently now, and felt that his first and most important duty was to carry the dark tidings to Good Enough Ranch in order to set pursuit afoot at the earliest possible moment. And he strove to arise erect, but in vain. He was as yet too faint, his powers were too completely shattered by that terrible shock. And with a dogged grit he crawled along the trail on his hands and knees, grating his teeth savagely to keep back the shooting pains that pierced his brain and blinded his eyes.

"I will—it is for her sake!" he gasped.

And this display of pure grit brought its own reward with it, for the further he crept, the stronger he grew, the clearer his brain became. And after leaving Rattlesnake Coulee half a mile behind, Tom, aided by a crooked stick which he came across, managed to gain his feet and hobble along with more ease and rapidity.

This it was that caused Lark Fuller to stare beneath his curved palm toward the glowing sun, and it was the recognition of Tom Allen that caused him to lessen the load of his good horse by dropping Don Sancho Pedro to the ground. This it was that drew the clear, ringing shout from his bearded lips.

Poor Tom Allen caught that shout, and gazed dizzily ahead to recognize in the coming rider a friend. A glad cry escaped his lips, and he dropped his stick, trying to run to meet Lark Fuller, the sooner to tell his black tale. But his will was greater than his physical capacity. He staggered a few paces, only to trip and fall heavily, just as Lark Fuller took a flying leap from his speeding horse and catching him in his strong arms, break the force of his fall.

"She's gone—Orabel!" gasped the poor fellow, that thought still uppermost in his mind. "Take trail—save her!"

He could say no more. The last remnant of his overtasked powers yielded, and he sunk limply into those sturdy arms.

Lark Fuller at that moment could have cursed himself for being a total abstainer, but his frown vanished as he caught the rapid trampling of hoofs on the hard prairie, and glanced around to see Long Tom Deakin approaching at the head of his contingent of cowboys.

"Hurray fer our side, boss!" cried the excited veteran, drawing rein and leaping from the saddle. "It's the fat gent, an' still 'live an' kickin', or I'm a howlin' liar right from Storyville!"

"Who's got a flask? Quick! the poor fellow is 'most gone up!" the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch uttered, holding out one hand as he gently lowered the body until the rudely bandaged head rested upon his bended knee.

He caught at the first bottle offered, and pressing down the jaw of his patient, he cautiously suffered the strong liquor to trickle down the parched throat. It seemed to be just the thing most needed, for Tom Allen swallowed freely, and was opening his eyes when Eugene and Mary galloped up to the spot.

"Alive! thanks be to kind heaven!" gasped

Mary, springing from her saddle without waiting for assistance. "My poor, poor Tom!"

"He'll git over it, ma'am, don't you fret," kindly muttered Lark Fuller as he quietly resigned his charge to the one who had a better right. "He's proved hisself a man, clean through, by this work. Not one out of a hundred could or would 'a' traveled this fur with that head o' his'n."

"For her—Orabel!" muttered Tom, hastily turning his face away from the passionate kisses which at least one man present would have bartered his soul for, and counted himself the gainer by the exchange. "Go follow—never mind me—all for her!"

"Has he said anything coherent? Has he told how it happened? Did he see them?" hurriedly muttered Eugene Hilliard, his face pale as that of a corpse, the hand which he rested on the shoulder of his foreman trembling violently.

Lark Fuller shook his head slowly.

"Only that she's gone, an' to beg me fer to foller after, 'sides what you jest hearn him mutter, boss. But I reckon we've got the right end of it from the boy. He see'd two men totin' her on hossback, an' a squint at the trail they must 'a' left down in Rattlesnake Coulee 'll do the rest."

He said no more, but leaping into the saddle, dashed away along the crooked trail left by poor Tom Allen in his desperate fight against such terrible odds.

The strong liquor was beginning to work in the veins of the wounded man, and resisting the efforts of his sister to ascertain just how seriously he was injured, he struggled to regain his feet as Long Tom Deakin was about leading his cowboys after their foreman.

"Stop!" he cried in stronger tones, as he rose, his feet wide spread to keep himself from falling, while Mary lent her aid to sustain him. "I want a horse. I'll pay any price, but I'm bound to have one!"

The cowboys stared at him in puzzled amazement, for the moment unable to comprehend his meaning. But Mary's quick wit divined his wish, and she cried in troubled, beseeching tones:

"You cannot, Tom, you are too weak to ride! You must—"

"I must go—it's for her, for Orabel!" muttered Tom, lurching forward and grasping the bridle of the nearest horse. "I'll pay you, but I've got to have this horse, my good fellow!"

"Let him hev it, Dan," hurriedly uttered Long Tom Deakin. "You kin double up with one o' the boys. No time fer argyin' now—I'm off!"

So he was, like an arrow fresh loosed from the bow, and relinquishing his animal, the cowboy leaped up behind one of his mates and the whole party followed their leader, leaving Eugene with Mary and Tom.

In vain they both sought to argue with Tom. Doggedly he refused to listen to reason. Orabel was in peril. She had been captured while under his protection, and he could never look her in the face again if he were to remain idle while men were trying to rescue her.

He strove to mount the horse unaided, but failed. And his excitement was so evidently growing that Eugene, fearing the consequences, muttered to Mary Allen:

"It will do more harm than good to keep him back. We will keep by him until he is willing to stop. It is the best we can do."

Though it was sorely against her better judgment, Mary was forced to yield, and Eugene assisted Tom into the saddle. And gripping the pommel with his trembling hands, the fat lover rode on, for once in a fair way to make a record for himself.

Meantime Lark Fuller was not idle. He gained Rattlesnake Coulee, and leaping from the saddle, left his well-trained horse to take care of itself, while he hurriedly but thoroughly examined the "sign" left behind them by the kidnappers. And when Tom Allen, supported on either side by his friend and sister, rode up, the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch was ready with his report.

"It's a plain story this fur, boss," he said, in cool, even tones as he stood before the pale ranchero. "The lad told a straight tale, an' I've picked up what he couldn't see from whar he watched. Two devils done all the work. They must 'a' counted on your sister comin' back by this trail, fer they spent quite a little while in the weeds, yender; the way tha'r critters trompled the ground tells so much."

"Right thar the one knelt down when he shot the gent, an' then out with his rope, droppin' his rifle on the ground; you kin see the prent. T'other ketched the hoss the mistress rid, an' pulled her off. You kin see one o' her footprints left onkivered here."

And after this fashion Lark hastily but clearly explained all that had transpired in Rattlesnake Coulee, adding:

"They was only the two, though the back trail shows fo' hosses. I make out the two your sister and Mr. Allen rid; the others is strange to me, but I've marked 'em down in my mind so's I'd know 'em ef I was to come on 'em a thousan' miles from this an' ten year from now. 'It'll be a hot chase, sence the devils ain't

many to make a fight. We want hard an' fast riders more'n anythin' else, an' they won't be any need of takin' the hull gang along, onless—"

A howl by way of protest broke from the lips of the cowboys, and Tom Allen cried, doggedly: "I'm going, and I'll shoot the man that tries to keep me back!"

Lark Fuller smiled faintly, then added:

"Let all go, ef they like, at least ontel the comin' of dark shets us off the trail. Then we'll hev more time to argy the matter over. I go fu'st, an' I'll shoot the one that tries to cut in ahead. The trail's all we've got to go by now, an' I won't run any resks."

He sprung lightly into the saddle as he uttered these words, riding out of the coulee and dashing at full speed over the prairie, leaning low down in the saddle and picking up the trail as if by magic.

Again Mary tried to coax her wounded brother to listen to reason, but without success. He was determined to do all he could to redeem what he felt was a fault on his part, and he would ride on until he fell senseless from the saddle rather than yield sooner.

"I can't leave you, dearest, even though it is my sister who is in peril!" whispered Eugene, as they left the coulee together. "After all, Lark Fuller can do better without me. I know nothing of such work, and he is the best of trailers. I would only bother him, perhaps."

"I don't want any help—unless it is to blow out my infernal brains for letting her—ah!" and poor, self-accusing Tom groaned in bitterness.

Right or wrong, he felt that all her misfortunes were owing to his carelessness. If he had only been on his guard! If he had not gone mooning along like a love-sick calf!

The sun was almost touching the swells of the prairie ahead of the rescuing party, and hearts were growing anxious as the shades of night promised to soon put an end to their efforts. Lark Fuller was racing on in advance, his head bent low, intent only on not over-riding the trail, when a clear shout from Long Tom Deakin caused him to glance swiftly around. He saw the tall cowboy motioning ahead, and turning his eyes in that direction, he saw something that caused him to instantly draw rein, his good steed falling back to its haunches with the strain.

And as he shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun, Lark Fuller saw, indistinctly, the shapes of horses and riders directly ahead.

CHAPTER VIII.

"SEE! THE CONQUERING HERO COMES!"

BUT that one horrible, blood-curdling cry escaped the lips of Sam Leffler, then he plunged heavily to the ground, dead ere he could realize how fatally his schemes had gone astray.

A hoarse, snarling curse burst from the black bearded lips of Jim Farley as he saw the red face of his partner in crime dyed a still redder hue, and whirling about he whipped forth a revolver, crouching like a panther for its leap, his face convulsed with fury.

But before he could decide just where that deadly marksman was located, another stream of fire shot through the shadows, and the Indian-like ruffian reeled back, crying hoarsely as he raised his weapon:

"Foul play, durn—"

Like an echo came a third shot, and Jim Farley bit his words short off with a savage curse and howl as his legs gave way beneath his weight. As he fell, his weapon exploded, but it was with the muzzle elevated until the top of the tree to whose trunk Orabel Hilliard was tied, alone suffered from the whistling lead.

And then, with a clear, encouraging shout, a tall, active figure leaped past the breathless maiden, standing between her and the ruffians, a still smoking revolver clasped in one hand, the other holding a bared knife before his swelling bosom, as though anticipating an immediate attack in force.

A frightful, choking sound came from the lips of Jim Farley as he made a desperate effort to regain his feet. Only one or two words were articulate enough for Orabel, greatly agitated as she was, to understand.

"Cuss—tuck me foul—"

Supported by one hand and knee, Jim Farley threw up his revolver and pulled trigger again, but again were the fates against him. Swift as light the bold stranger met and foiled his action, sending a bullet home square and true in the center of the ruffian's forehead, driving his body back in a quivering heap, his earthly career run forever.

"Any more after a taste of the same medicine?" cried the bold rescuer, his tall, athletic form drawn erect, ready for swift action the moment he should locate another enemy, his revolver cocked and his right arm drawn up and back until the smoking muzzle pointed toward the zenith. "Don't be backward about coming forward! Now I've fairly got my hand in, the more the merrier! One or a dozen, I care not!"

With strangely thrilling sensations had Orabel Hilliard watched all this, occurring so rapid-

ly, all being over in a single breath as it were. And now, as she heard that defiant challenge, she gasped:

"There are no more, sir! There were only the two men."

At the first sound of her voice the stranger whirled about on his heel as though expecting an attack from the rear, but almost as soon his weapons vanished and with his figure drawn erect, his hands behind him, he stood gazing direct into the beautiful face of the captive in whose behalf he had reddened his hands with the life-blood of two fellow-beings.

And Orabel! Breathless, her heart fluttering rapidly, almost suffocatingly, she gazed upon her bold rescuer with glowing eyes, for the moment feeling that she was again in one of her marvelous day-dreams. For in almost every respect this daring stranger answered to her fond ideal, to the mental estimate she had formed of her hero, her Man With a Record, Captain Crisp!

Taller than the average, yet so justly proportioned that this extreme height was not noticeable at first glance, the stranger was the perfect picture of health, strength, activity and manly beauty. His skin was marvelously clear and smooth as a tiny ray of sunshine fell athwart his face, seeming to the overwrought fancy of the maiden a halo. There was a tinge of red on each cheek, showing clearly through the slight bronzing of the sun. His eyes shone brilliantly, black as jet, large and full, with the light of battle dying out of them to give place to a look of surprised reverence. His red lips were parted just sufficiently to afford a glimpse of white, even teeth, shaded though they were by the jetty mustaches, curled at the ends with just the suspicion of vanity.

His head was bare, having evidently lost his hat as he leaped out into the little natural opening. Curis of raven blackness covered his well-shaped skull, not long and flowing, as they should have been to fully carry out the dream-picture of her hero which Orabel had that day drawn for Tom Allen.

His garb came nearer the mark, however, being a comfortable compound of civilization and border custom; a shirt of fine flannel, silk bound and laced, which might very well have served on a tennis lawn, with collar open at the throat, encircled by a silk kerchief, the ends of which fell over his swelling bosom. A broad belt of silk webbing encompassed his round, muscular waist, bearing cartridges for rifle and revolver, with scabbards for a brace of pistols and heavy knife. Trowsers of drab corduroy, soft and flexible, the lower extremities hidden by the tops of fine hunting and riding boots, spurred at the heels.

All this Orabel saw at a single glance, and as she noted the graceful, yet unstudied position, the perfect symmetry of limb and body, the almost unearthly beauty of face and feature; as she recalled how this stranger had risked his life in order to set her free from captivity; bearing in mind, too, the many day-dreams which she had formed regarding the man whom her dead father had singled out for her future husband; is it to be wondered at that she was powerfully impressed, that she felt almost positive this was indeed her long-thought-of hero?

The stranger, too, seemed powerfully impressed by the lovely vision which he saw before him, and for a brief space their eyes met in a steady, magnetic gaze which both felt with unusual force. But then, recovering himself with an evident effort, the handsome stranger bowed, a pleasant smile chasing away the last remnant of battle fury, his voice clear, deep, musical:

"Thanks for your kind assurance, lady! For your sake I am glad this sickening affair is over. Permit me!"

The half-empty revolver slipped back into its case, and a few deft touches of the keen blade severed her bonds and left her free to rise. He held out one hand to assist her, then uttered a low ejaculation of surprise and even mortification. For, still like one in a dream, still thinking of the hero her maiden fancy had painted, and recognizing him in this noble looking paladin, Orabel bowed her head and almost reverently touched her burning lips to his palm!

Little wonder that he was amazed, withdrawing his hand hurriedly, a burning flush leaping into his face.

And Orabel, recalled to everyday life by his action, bowed her fair head and burst into tears, her meekly figure quivering and shaking with long pent up emotions.

"Dear lady! I beg of you!" stammered the stranger, plainly taken all aback by this true womanly ending.

He seemed wholly at a loss what steps to take, what to do or to say in this emergency, and so he stood idle, one hand nervously tugging at his jetty mustache, his black eyes watching the weeping maiden with a sorely perplexed light in their lustrous depths. And doubtless this was the very wisest thing he could have done under the circumstances.

The poor girl had suffered a severe strain during the past few hours, and now that the reaction had come, she would be all the better for shedding a few tears. And the stranger seemed to realize this fact in a few moments, for he si-

lently turned away and passed over to where the two bodies lay weltering in their gore.

One after the other he turned them over until he could scan their faces, and his own countenance grew hard and pale as he carefully examined them, as he assured himself they were both dead beyond the power of doing further evil or injury.

Sam Leffler, in all probability, never fully realized what had happened. Struck in the back of his skull by the heavy bullet, which tore its way through the brain and emerged above his eyes, all sensation must have been instantly obliterated.

Either one of the shots received by Jim Farley would have caused death, though his vitality was so great that he held up long enough to seek revenge. But he was dead enough now, and the stranger showed his white teeth in a hard smile as he rose erect and turned away from his victims. Clearly he would lose little sleep mourning over his deeds!

A quick, covert glance showed him that Orabel had partially recovered her composure. She was drying her eyes, and as she saw him turn toward her, she hastily rose erect, stepping forward with extended hand, smiling faintly through the remaining moisture, her voice trembling and uncertain, but filled with a gratitude that was easily understood.

"Words are so poor, but, sir, I thank you—thank you from the very bottom of my heart!" she murmured, her deep dark eyes meeting his for a moment, then drooping behind their long lashes, a soft blush suffusing her cheeks as she read the admiration which he could not entirely conceal.

"The debt is mine, rather, lady," he said in his mellow tones, as he accepted the proffered hand, bowing low over it and just brushing it with his lips. "If I have been of service to you, however slight, that knowledge is in itself my reward."

"They were so cruel—they threatened such frightful things!" and Orabel shivered as she cast a timid glance toward the silent figures lying there in the dead leaves and grass.

Silently the stranger took her arm, turning away and leading her from the clearing, through the undergrowth to the open prairie, where the red rays of the setting sun made a far more cheerful picture.

"The wretches have paid the penalty for their crimes, as far as mortal man can punish them, lady," he uttered, gravely, then adding in a lighter, more cheerful tone: "Let them and their memory pass forever from your life. That should be bright and cheery, filled with visions of happiness and love, rather than—"

He checked himself with a low, mellow laugh, then added:

"That shows what a poor logician I am, since I was about to recall the very thoughts I bade you dismiss from your memory!"

"You are so kind!" murmured Orabel, the olden glamour again stealing over her as she looked and listened.

Surely this was her hero? Surely she could not be mistaken?

He shook his head with a rueful smile.

"You are very kind to say so, lady, and I would be very glad to think you wholly sincere, but that is impossible. You must ever associate me in your mind with my first appearance—one of fierce passions, of death and bloodshed! And I so ardently wished—"

He paused short, biting his lips quickly as though he had said far more than he intended. And as she noticed this, the glowing light deepened in those glorious dark eyes. Surely her thoughts were correct! This was—this must be her hero!

"And yet, what other course could I pursue?" slowly added the stranger, with a quick glance into her face. "I knew those rascals held you prisoner. I saw enough to tell me that while I watched them riding toward the timber island, I feared to expose you to their fierce resentment should I attack them openly, or attempt to secure your release by milder means."

"You acted nobly, sir," was the soft response as he hesitated, like one embarrassed by her silence.

"It seems cowardly, rather!" with a sudden flash of spirit.

Orabel impulsively caught his hand between hers, meeting his gaze firmly as she rapidly spoke:

"You are wronging yourself, sir. Though I could have wished my rescue might have been effected without bloodshed, I am sure that would have been impossible."

"I reasoned something after the same fashion, myself."

"And you were right," Orabel positively cried. "They swore that if there was any attempt to rescue me, before they received the gold they were resolved to obtain by way of ransom, they would use the knife and then fight their way through to safety. And if you could have seen the satanic look in that man's eyes as he swore this to me, you would feel less scruples about his—his death!"

A soft laugh parted the stranger's red lips.

"His death does not trouble me greatly, in itself. It is the fact that I felt obliged to at-

tack them from behind and under cover with you as an enforced witness, lady. It will always remain a blot on my record, in my own estimation!"

"Only in yours, then, sir, believe me, when the whole truth is known. Think! not of the brutal manner in which they treated me, but of their cold-blooded cruelty in shooting down my companion—poor Tom!"

Her voice faltered, her hands covered her eyes as she shiveringly recalled that terrible sight. Gently the stranger took her hands in his and drew them down. His voice was very soft and tender as he spoke:

"Perhaps it is not so bad as you think, Miss Hilliard. Perhaps—"

Orabel glanced up into his handsome countenance with wide-open eyes, a little ejaculation of surprise—glad surprise—escaping her lips.

"You know me, then?"

Again that laugh, softer, more musical than before, if that could be. And still holding her hands in his strong grasp, the stranger said:

"I have known you for more years than I like to recall, just now, Miss Hilliard; and yet you and I never before met in the flesh. Can you solve the enigma—Orabel?"

Softly, gently, after a brief pause as though in doubt, came her name from his lips. And a bright, yet wistful smile played around his lips and shone in the depths of his lustrous eyes.

"You are papa's friend—you are Willard Crisp, the Man With a Record!" impulsively cried Orabel, all doubts vanishing now, all fears gone, and only the memory of those blissful day-dreams remaining—only those and the still more delicious reality!

"The old title! how familiar it sounds!" and Captain Crisp laughed softly, yet with a strain of sadness in his tones as though the peculiar title recalled sorrow as well as pleasure.

"It is the one he seemed fondest of," murmured Orabel, hardly conscious that his hand was drawing her form closer to his until they stood side by side, almost touching, their hands still interlocked. "He called you by it in the last lines he ever wrote. He bade me never forget it or its owner—the truest, purest, noblest friend mortal man ever had!"

"He wrote that of me? And to you?" softly uttered Captain Crisp, with a very unheroic trembling in his voice.

"Those very words," smiled Orabel, through her tears—tears of pure joy, now.

Insensibly, Captain Crisp had stolen one arm partly around her trim waist, but now he suddenly removed it, before she made the discovery of the gentle caress. This was a bird of no common feather, and he feared to startle it prematurely.

"He was one man among ten thousand, and gave me greater love and respect than I was entitled to, perhaps," he said, in a lighter tone. "I loved him, and so did my best to win and retain his esteem. I am more than proud to see that I did not entirely fail. I am delighted to find that he liked me well enough to sound my praises in your ears."

There was a meaning in the emphasis which Captain Crisp put on the final pronoun, that brought a rosy flush into the smooth cheeks of the maiden, and her dark eyes sunk before his plainly admiring gaze.

"Some day we will talk further of the good old gentleman. Though there were many years' difference in our ages, yet we became very near and dear friends, and doubtless there are many things I can tell you about his everyday life that would interest you."

"There is—there must be!" impulsively cried Orabel. "I have so often wished for this day to come! For a meeting with you, whom he so loved and honored—who knew him so well, so much better in those last days than even I, his daughter! And he spoke of you so kindly, so lovingly! It is not like meeting a stranger, but rather a very near and dear friend. I have so longed to see you—"

The brilliant light that shot into the black eyes, as she impulsively uttered these words, seemed to recall Orabel to her senses, and her voice faltered, her eyes drooped, and she hastily withdrew the hands that until now she had suffered him to clasp so closely. Somehow the ardent admiration with which his eyes were filled frightened her.

Captain Crisp saw this, and proved himself a man of tact as well as one of action. Though still warm and gentle, his voice was far more business-like and matter-of-fact as he spoke again:

"That wish is mutual, Miss Hilliard; but since we have waited so many days, surely we can wait yet a little longer. Business before pleasure is a very good motto, and in my own delight at meeting the child of my dear old friend, I must not forget the still higher claim of your friends."

"Poor Tom! I had almost forgotten him—Heaven pardon me!" murmured Orabel, her face turning pale with self-reproach.

Poor Tom, indeed! If he could only have known what it was he was hastening to meet!

"Hope for the best, Miss Hilliard. It may be that your friend escaped more cheaply than you think, just at present. I will get the animals, if

you are not afraid to remain here alone for a few moments."

Orabel bowed assent. She was not afraid. Her hero had come, and with him near, what should she fear?

Captain Crisp quickly brought the four animals out from the *motte* and placed the side-saddle on the one Orabel indicated. He assisted her to mount, and then leaped into the saddle on the horse she identified as that belonging to the Good Enough Ranch.

"I know," laughed Captain Crisp, as Orabel glanced up in surprise at his taking a direction almost opposite the one which would lead them to Good Enough Ranch. "I am not not going astray, though it has been many a long day since I visited this section of the country. I left my horse over yonder swell, when I started to investigate those two rascals, and he is too good a friend for me to desert."

A few moments proved the truth of this assertion, and Captain Crisp changed to his own saddle, turning toward the distant ranch, Orabel guiding him back by way of Rattlesnake Coulee.

As they rode briskly along, Captain Crisp told his story, so far as it related to the kidnappers.

He had caught a glimpse of the kidnappers from a distance, and the burden which the leader bore awakened his suspicions that there was mischief in the wind. He kept himself carefully screened behind the convenient swell in the prairie until he saw the ruffians ride into the *motte*. Then he left his horse hopped and stole cautiously forward, managing to escape the watch maintained part of the time by Sam Leffler, all the easier because that worthy seemed to anticipate danger only from the direction of Good Enough Ranch.

What followed, has been sufficiently described.

Scarcely had Captain Crisp finished his explanation, than he drew rein, catching that of the animal ridden by Orabel, gazing keenly, suspiciously ahead at the figure of a single horseman who was approaching. And then, a moment later, they both caught sight of a body of horsemen at some little distance behind the first one.

"Can you recognize them, Miss Hilliard?" he asked, drawing his revolver and replacing the empty shells with fresh cartridges. "With so precious a charge, I must be prudent, you know!"

A moment's silence, then Orabel uttered a glad cry.

"It is Lark Fuller, our foreman! And those behind him must also be friends!"

"Then in all probability your friend, Mr. Allen, has managed to carry the news to Good Enough Ranch," more lightly uttered Captain Crisp, as he suffered Orabel to move forward.

"Heaven kindly grant it!" murmured Orabel, fervently.

So great was her desire to learn this, that she touched her horse sharply with the spur and dashed forward at full speed, just as Lark Fuller, warned by Long Tom Deakin's cry, lifted his head and gazed toward them, for a brief space baffled by the sun at their back. But as Orabel waved her hand, and Captain Crisp sent forth a clear, ringing shout, the foreman came thundering down to meet them, his gray eyes all aglow, his homely countenance fairly radiant with joy and gladness.

"God he thanked, ma'am, that you've come out all right!"

"Thanks to this brave gentleman, good Lark! But Tom—Mr. Allen? You have found him? He is—is not—"

"He's comin', bad hurt, but boun' to be in at the death, ma'am, fer all he's fitter to be abed an' tender nursed. He's gritty, sure!"

By this time the cowboys ranged alongside, and amid their cheers and hearty congratulations, Orabel could not help noticing the many curious glances which were cast toward the tall handsome stranger, and so she turned to Lark Fuller, as the representative of the party in the absence of her brother, saying:

"An old friend of my poor father, Mr. Fuller. No doubt you have heard of him, Captain Crisp."

"Cap'n Willard B. Crisp?" uttered Lark, interrogatively, as he took the proffered hand and shook it slowly, his crooked eyes fixed intently on the handsome face before him.

Captain Crisp bowed slightly, seeming nettled by that steady gaze.

"The same, sir. Have I ever met you before? Your face is not familiar, and I have a very fair memory."

"Not that I knows on," was the quiet response, as Lark Fuller dropped the hand and drew back a trifle. "I've hearn the name afore, though, an' I wanted to make sure it was the right one."

"If there is another claimant to the title, I have never had the good fortune to meet him," lightly laughed Captain Crisp, as he turned to Orabel. "That is your brother coming with the lady and your wounded friend, I presume, Miss Hilliard?"

"It is!" and a glad light leaped into the dark eyes as she saw Tom Allen riding rapidly toward them, now disdaining all support from his companions, having clearly recognized her. "We

will meet them half-way, if you please, captain!"

He quickly joined her, and Lark Fuller called Long Tom Deakin to one side, whispering hastily:

"The work is over, I reckon, old man. You take the boys back with them, as a sorter guard o' honor. I'll be home afore long."

He did not wait for any answer to his speech, but wheeled his good horse and rode rapidly away over the prairie, taking the trail just made by Captain Crisp and Orabel, but giving no sign of picking it up while any eye could see and note his purpose.

Straight on to the *motte* which had witnessed such strange scenes that afternoon, Lark Fuller rode, leaping from the saddle at the edge of the brush and then pressing straight in to the center, where lay the ghastly evidence of the prowess of the Man With a Record. Carefully he examined each body, the pockets as well as wounds, then stood over them, staring moodily down into the dimly-visible faces, thinking deeply.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HERO BOUND WITH SILKEN FETTERS.

AND when the sun went down that eventful evening, it found Captain Crisp an honored guest at Good Enough Ranch.

Not alone because of the great service which he had rendered Orabel back at the timber island, though that, of course, was not forgotten by brother and sister, but mainly because of his past connection with the one-time owner of Good Enough Ranch, Morris Hilliard.

Orabel never tired of speaking about those by-gone days, and as the time passed on, as day followed day and week followed week, many were the long conversations which she held with her Man With a Record over the struggling days when he first came in contact with the fortune-seeker. And willingly enough Captain Crisp talked, though his tone grew more guarded and his words less free whenever others came near.

If Orabel noticed this—and what was there that concerned the Man With a Record that she did not notice?—it seemed perfectly right and natural. It was to her that the most of those half-messages were directed by the dead parent. To her alone they should be delivered.

More and more sure was she that her brightest, most romantic dreams concerning this hero of hers had not exceeded the actual truth. Little by little she was penetrating the modest mask of reserve which he had at first assumed, and each discovery but rendered her the happier, since it went to prove how truly, how perfectly she had drawn the portrait of her unseen demigod.

It was a strange, unnatural atmosphere for more than one member of that household, and if Orabel felt almost as though she was in heaven, poor Tom Allen could have taken oath he had fallen uncomfortably near the portals of heaven's antipodes!

It had been hard enough to have Orabel rescued by one handsome, superbly formed, a model of manly strength and grace, but to have that same hero introduced to him as Captain Crisp! To know that at last the dreamed-of knight had put in an appearance, after the most approved fashion, too! And to see how Orabel hovered about him, shy and timid and yet almost with the air of one who has the right, who has a prior claim, who—it was too much for poor Tom, and he would beat a hasty retreat until alone by himself, when he would fume and rave and curse the unlucky star which presided at his birth.

"If he was only half-way worthy of her, it wouldn't come nigh so hard!" the poor devil would groan, at times punching his head, not yet cured of the wound that had hindered him from making pursuit and forestalling this romantic paladin of the prairies. "But he ain't! He's a fraud—a fraud of the first water! At least," with certain qualms of conscience, "I almost hope he is!"

And Eugene Hilliard, too, lived a feverish, unhealthy life during those days immediately following the coming of the Man With a Record. Not that he had the bitter pangs of jealousy to torture him particularly. Captain Crisp scarcely cast a second glance toward the pale, quiet, quaker-like Mary Allen, and only addressed her when chance threw them together without others between them. He had eyes and thoughts only for queenly Orabel, and for all of him, Eugene was free to woo and win, hands down.

It might have puzzled Eugene himself to have explained just why he was so restless, just why his black eyes wore such a feverish light. He had not seemed himself since the day or two preceding the attempted abduction of his sister, but ever since then his nervous restlessness had increased until Mary Allen, cool-nerved and self-reliant though she was under ordinary circumstances, actually began to dread being left alone in his company.

Thus the days passed by, interesting enough, perhaps, to those more immediately concerned, but offering few incidents which would be welcomed here. Then Eugene Hilliard proposed an

excursion which was agreed upon without a single dissenting voice.

Not many miles distant, though not upon the grounds belonging to Good Enough Ranch, was a broad, winding deep lagoon, connected with the river only in times of high water, but plentifully supplied with fish at all times, and really affording a pleasant place for recreation.

Properly this "lagoon" was but a nearly disused portion of the river-bed, deserted long ago for a shorter cut. At one point it formed a wide horseshoe bend, the outer portion of which touched the high and rocky bank which rose into hills of respectable size. And here, where the waters were broad and deep and clear, it was decided to have a modest little picnic, consisting of their own party alone, with a few cowboys under command of Lark Fuller, to do the work and cater to their whims.

There was just a spice of danger in the project, too, at which none laughed more heartily than Mary and Orabel. There had been more than one panther shot in the heavy timber that bordered the "Horse-foot Lagoon," and it was common report that the deeper portions of its waters gave shelter to monstrous alligators who had on more than one occasion feasted on human flesh. Sometime the vague date assigned to this last vaguer legend. Somebody, the witness, or the historian or the individuals who had furnished the feast. And that very vagueness made it all the more spicy and enticing. It was not too awfully horrible, but just blood-curdling enough!

And thus it came about that the usually silent shore of "Horse-foot Lagoon" was invaded by a brisk and bustling part of pleasure-seekers on the morning when we again take up the thread of the story we set out to narrate.

Quiet, business-like as ever, Lark Fuller had fulfilled the trust reposed in him with his usual thoroughness. With his cowboys he had carefully beaten the heavy timber along the rocky ridge back of the lagoon, assuring himself that it contained no animals dangerous to human life that early in the season. He found a few signs of alligators along the shores, but like the majority of Southerners he felt only contempt for those clumsy lizards.

Under his directions the cowboys quickly completed their arrangements, clearing away a space for spreading the feast which was to be no mean feature of the picnic; forming rustic seats under the trees, where the eye could be treated with prospects of more or less beauty; piling up dry fagots handy for use when the good housekeeper came to superintend the cooking; making a mighty swing out of knotted lariats; and then sending them off with guns and rods to supply an abundance of game and fish for all possible wants.

Mighty preparations for so small a party, sure enough! But the young master of Good Enough Ranch had given his orders, and of course they must be carried out to the very letter.

At first it threatened to consist of but two couple, for Tom Allen moodily declared himself too weak to make one of the company, but then he yielded to the hasty coaxing of his sister, if not to his own secret inclinations. Poor Tom! in those feverish days he was a very weather-cock, veering so rapidly that one could hardly keep pace with his changes.

If small in size, there were enough contradictory emotions in it to answer for a host! Eugene Hilliard had determined to improve the opportunity by learning his fate, once for all.

And there was a steady, resolute glow in the dark eyes of the Man With a Record when the picnic was proposed that should have warned Orabel. And yet—why should she be warned? Why should she shrink and shiver at the mere thought of his openly avowing his love?

In view of the past, of her numerous day-dreams in which Captain Crisp always played the central part; remembering the last wish of her father, sent to her from his deathbed; bearing in mind how implicitly she had surrendered herself to those dreams, to that prayerful command, to the feeling that she belonged to her hero whenever he saw fit to come and claim his rights; it is strange that Orabel should doubt and dread the outcome of that excursion—but it is still a fact.

This before the start was made, but by the time the lagoon was reached, all forebodings were forgotten. Captain Crisp was unusually bright and amusing, even for him, and Orabel was glowing with pleasure and life as they caught their first glimpse of the dark yet clear waters that here were wide enough to be called a lake, almost.

No need to follow their movements too closely. It was like all picnics, on a small scale. There was laughter and noise, rapid flitting here and there, talking, singing, swinging, playing—all the old story over again, even to the final division into couples, where the stronger will had its way, at least to outward seeming.

Captain Crisp discovered a small bark canoe floating under an overhanging clump of shrubbery, apparently recently hidden there by its owner, perhaps one of the few straggling Indians who remained in that quarter to drag out a life very different from that led by their war-like ancestors.

Without troubling himself as to the ownership, Captain Crisp at once took possession, and driving the frail craft to and fro, turning it in short circles, performing various other feats which might be explained by a laudable desire to prove its sea-worthy qualities quite as much as a wish to "show off" before his lady-love, he finally swept it up to the bank and begged Orabel to enter for a short ride.

And then they shot rapidly away over the dark waters, the light canoe fairly flying under the strong arm and skillful paddle, forming a pleasant picture to watch with ordinary eyes.

Eyes were upon them, too, but with little of pleasure in their depths. And poor Tom Allen felt that it would have been a blessing to him had Sam Lefler sent his lead just a thought truer!

By degrees Captain Crisp relaxed his exertions, satisfied with displaying his skill and strength, possibly. And though he kept the slender paddle moving, it was with an art that held them almost stationary near the center of the broad sweep of water in the bend.

He was talking as only he knew how to talk, soft and low, with love showing in almost every look and change, yet so subtly veiled that even one less completely under the spell than was Orabel Hilliard could hardly have taken alarm at either. He was in deep earnest, too, though so carefully feeling the way before him, fearing to make a rash or premature step. And he believed that at last the time was ripe!

He cast a keen, searching glance around them, and a brief shadow flitted over his handsome countenance as he noted more than one face turned toward them. On the hillside were seated Mary Allen and Eugene Hilliard, both looking out over the lagoon. Lower, and to one side, lay the fat figure of Tom Allen, scowling savagely at the "handsomer man" with whom the lady he loved seemed only too ready to run away. And yet nearer the shore slowly moved the heavy-looking figure of Lark Fuller.

For a moment he was strongly tempted to ash the paddle deep into the dark waters and urge the canoe on around the bend, where they would be entirely hidden from observation. But once more his prudence and cool reasoning came to the rescue. He would not make any move that might prematurely open the eyes of this beautiful dreamer.

And whirling the canoe, he drove it back to shore, begging Orabel to retain her seat for a moment. He leaped out and quickly returned with a pair of light fishing-rods and bait, laughingly saying as he again plied the paddle and they sped out over the tranquil waters:

"Those who feast must work, Miss Orabel. We will go a-fishing, and make glad the heart of good Aunty Marshall with our contribution to her larder!"

He baited her hook, and then his own. Both were dropped into the water, and to careless eyes, they seemed wholly absorbed in fishing; but under this convenient mask, Captain Crisp lost little time in dropping the thin mask which he had kept over his heart.

"Orabel—I may call you that? I may drop the formal prefix?" he softly uttered, his black eyes filling with a beseeching light that caused her long-lashed lids to droop, a bright flush suffusing her face.

"Why not?" she murmured, her voice barely audible.

"It is not as though we were recent acquaintances. Somehow I have felt that we knew each other ever since those long-ago days when, over our lonely camp-fire, Morris Hilliard dwelt so long and lovingly over the charms of his dearly loved daughter. Talking of his children was ever a delight to him, and from being a careless listener at first, I grew interested—more deeply interested than even you will give me credit for, I fear, Orabel!"

How tenderly he pronounced that name! Coming from his lips, it seemed almost a caress!

"Until then, I had never realized what it was to love, what I call love. I never had a sister, and my mother died while I was little more than an infant. I grew up almost wild, wholly unloved. It may have been part my fault, but not entirely so, as I learned during those long talks with your father. Then I learned the great truth that love begets love. I felt that I could love, and love ardently. And I knew that I had never been loved as a child, since I only made this discovery so late in life."

He ceased speaking, but Orabel said nothing. Her face was now pale, not flushed. Strange emotions were struggling deep down in her heart. She was eager for him to continue, yet she longed to flee, to hide herself until she could fully analyze her feelings.

She would not have been a woman, had she remained wholly blind. She knew what would be the end of this opening. She knew that Captain Crisp intended to avow his love for her, and she hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry.

"Day after day, night after night Morris Hilliard spoke to me of you, drawing your picture so faithfully that, had I never seen an actual

likeness, one of those you sent him before his death, still I would have recognized you no matter when or where we might have met. Like him, I soon grew very fond of those hours in which you reigned supreme. Like him I learned to love you, ardently, passionately, though so hopelessly, as I so often told myself.

"I was alone in the world, with only my strong arm to win a competence. I had barely a name. I was growing in years. I was a foolish dreamer, whose eyes must be opened at all hazards, before all was lost. And so thinking, I tore myself away from my old friend, the only being in all this world whom I loved or who loved me!"

Again a pause, and still Orabel could not utter a word. A fish caught at her bait and ran to the end of her line, plucking savagely for a moment, then shaking the hook out as it pricked him. But neither she nor the Man With a Record noticed this. Truly, it was well that Aunty Marshall did not wholly depend on their efforts for the chowder!

"Only to come back again, Orabel! Only to return and hug the fire that was scorching itself deeper and deeper into my heart of hearts! And then, when Morris Hilliard began to picture the future in glowing colors—when he said his plans were nearly all arranged for bringing his children out to share his new home with him; when he spoke yet more openly, and hinted at what he called his dearest, most cherished dream—I could no longer hide the truth from myself.

"Orabel, my precious!" and though he seemed intent on his rod and line, those black eyes gazed into her flushed face with an intentness that at length forced her eyes to raise until they met his, shyly, almost affrightedly. "Orabel, you know what that secret is. You know that I had learned to love you as, I firmly believe, few men can love! And that love, Orabel, has grown and strengthened with each day that has passed, until now—now it passes the power of mortal tongue to picture! Orabel, darling, you are not angry with me for saying this?"

"No—not angry," was the slow, labored response as the dark eyes again drooped, her face turning strangely pale and agitated.

"Wait," he quickly uttered, as though dreading to press her for an answer just then. "Let me tell you all, first. Let me show you in its entirety the heart I offer you."

"When I could no longer blind my eyes to the truth, I held a long and desperate battle with myself. I knew I was unworthy the great and precious boon which my good old friend proposed to bestow upon me. Although I had not then seen even your portrait, save as a wee child, faded and worn, quaint and old-fashioned, I felt that you deserved a better fate than this. I knew, or believed, that when Morris Hilliard was to tell you his wishes, you would yield to them without a murmur. You see, Orabel, he read your letters to me so often. From them I gathered this estimate of your nature."

"I fought hard to crush out the love that was steadily growing to be a part of my heart. I fought a harder fight during those days than I ever fought before or since. I soon saw that I could not hope to win the fight as long as I remained with him, constantly singing your praise and dwelling fondly on the blissful days to come when you were with us, when you and I were man and wife! And so, almost without saying good-by to my true old friend, for I knew how hard he would strive to prevent my going, and Heaven knows that was difficult enough already! I went away, the better to conquer myself."

"You know what followed, Orabel," his voice lowering and becoming even more gentle. "You know how Morris Hilliard was suddenly taken ill and never rose from his bed until they bore him to his grave! And I was far away in the wilds of Old Mexico, fighting with myself, striving to prove myself an honest man even though it tore the heart from its rooting in my breast!"

"It was long months before I heard, in a roundabout way, of his demise. I started to go to his grave, but then I forced myself to turn back. I expected that his children would be there, and I could not yet meet you as I wished. The old passion was still burning fiercely. It would overpower me the moment I stood face to face with the original of those happy day-dreams. And so, I forced myself to wait still longer, until I believed I could meet you without betraying myself. Poor fool! you know how greatly I deceived myself!" he added, almost bitterly, as he changed his position.

Orabel gave a nervous start, and instinctively her gaze encountered his. So glowing were those lustrous orbs that she shrunk back trembling, she scarce knew why.

The Man With a Record seemed too deeply in love to notice this or to analyze it correctly. And his tones were more ardent than ever as he continued:

"It was to be, Orabel! I fought hard and I fought well, but all went for naught the moment I met you face to face. I feel that I have done all a man of honor could do. And now, without presuming on the past, bidding you forget all that Morris Hilliard may have written you in my behalf, begging you to judge me for

myself alone, I repeat—I love you, Orabel Hilliard! I love you as man never loved before! And as the greatest boon the whole earth and heaven combined can bestow upon me, I beg you to give me your love—to say that you will be my wife! Orabel—shall it be my Orabel?"

It was an appeal such as few maidens could have resisted, much less one who had for years dreamed of the speaker as a hero, as *her* hero! His handsome face and lustrous eyes. His musical tones. The deep and pathetic quavering in that mellow voice. The touching allusions to her dead parent, and vague hints at the wishes which she knew had been among the last, most ardent of Morris Hilliard's life.

And yet, the extended hand was not taken. Instead, Orabel shrunk back, her pale face averted, her hands trembling violently.

"Orabel—dear Orabel!" murmured the Man With a Record. "Have I been too sudden? Have I frightened you with my passion?"

With a desperate exertion of will, the maiden turned toward him, forcing her eyes to meet his glowing orbs. Only for a moment. Then her eyes drooped, but she spoke, slowly, almost like one in a dream:

"It is all clouded! I cannot see clearly! Wait a little, please."

"As long as you please, dearest," was the soft response. "I have waited so many years already! But I can wait longer—forever, if you so decide, darling! It will be but taking up the old sickening fight once more, and I am used to that. It will be harder than before, since I have seen you, since I have learned my wild dreams of those olden days were but as the ghost of the reality. For *your* sake I can do it, Orabel!"

Slowly he uttered these words, pausing at the end of each sentence as though expecting or hoping she would interpose. But even after he ended, she maintained silence for a brief space. Then she said, low and dreamily, her pale brows knitting perplexedly:

"It is so strange! I learned to love the Man With a Record through those long, earnest letters written by my father. I formed an ideal of the man my father praised as few honest men can praise. I set up that ideal more as an idol to be worshiped and bowed down to, rather than as a being of common flesh and blood. And when my father wrote to me—when he made known the wishes he had formed for my future life—I felt that in making him happy, I would be making myself blessed beyond computation! For, all unknown as he was, I loved this hero of mine!"

The Man With a Record leaned forward and touched her hand.

"Even as he worshiped you, Orabel! Even as he still loves you and longs for his reward after all these long years of battle! Darling, am I to wait still longer? Surely you love me in return?"

Orabel withdrew her hand, slowly shaking her head.

"That is what so puzzles my poor brain! For years I have loved my dream-hero with a love that passes description. For years I have known that in his own good time he would come to me and take me by the hand to lead me through the rest of this life. And knowing this, I have waited patiently, meekly, feeling that he knew best."

"A silly, childish dream, it seems to be, when put into cold words, but it has ever seemed a blissful reality to me. I never doubted. I never wavered for an instant. I did not ask when or how we were to meet. I felt assured that we *would* meet, and that I would recognize him even as he would recognize me, at the first glance."

"As we did—as I did, at least, Orabel!" softly murmured the Man With a Record, yet with an anxious light in his eyes, his face with less color in it than was customary.

Orabel shook her head, passing one trembling hand across her brow.

"Not in the way it seemed as I dreamed! I thought I recognized you, and my poor heart leaped with joy. But—it is so strange, so unlike what I fondly pictured it!"

"That was but a dream, after all, Orabel, while this is the reality. You say you have loved me ever—"

"It was Captain Crisp, the Man With a Record that I loved!" impulsively interposed the maiden, her eyes all aglow with a sudden fire.

"And am not I that happy individual?" ejaculated her companion, fairly dropping his fishing rod in his surprise at her strange words.

"Are you?" swiftly uttered Orabel, gazing fairly into his jetty eyes. "You *must* be!" and she answered her own question. "And yet, there comes a dark, gloomy shadow between us, even when my poor heart seems on the point of forgetting its trouble! I cannot understand it at all!"

"It is all too plain to me," and there was a trace of bitterness in his tones as he turned away to stare moodily into the water. "Your dream was but a dream, and it has vanished like all other dreams with your awakening. You dreamt that you loved—awaking, that love proves but a shadowy dream!"

Before Orabel could reply, even if she knew what to say in her present sorely perplexed state, there came a loud puffing sound, accompanied by an unpleasant musky odor, and turning quickly, Captain Crisp caught sight of a hideous head breaking the water close to the canoe.

Orabel shrunk away with a faint cry of terror, for those fishy eyes were staring at her with savage malignancy as it seemed, and Captain Crisp jerked out a revolver, taking quick aim and sending the lead direct into one sunken eye, without stopping to consider the almost certain consequence.

Bellowing savagely, the reptile dove, at the same time swinging its long tail around and striking the frail canoe between its two occupants, stove it and hurled them into the waters of the Lagoon!

CHAPTER X.

HE WOODED, BUT SHE WOULDN'T.

A PICNIC is proverbially Cupid's playground, where that scantily-clad and whimsical young gentleman enjoys his peculiar humor to the top of his bent, regardless of consequences; but it may be doubted if he ever had more work to attend to than on the present occasion, considering the number interested. The picnic proper consisted of but five persons, and each and every one of these five were numbered among "Dan Cupid's" victims.

As has already been hinted, Eugene Hilliard was growing more and more desperate, and at length he determined that Mary Allen should no longer foil his firm intention of asking her to become his wife. And more, that she should give him her final answer.

For a time Mary had rather more freedom than she had been vouchsafed of late, for Eugene as master of ceremonies, had to give Aunt Marshall her instructions, and assign to the cowboys the part they were to play. For Lark Fuller seemed to take but little interest in the affair or else knew little concerning the proper details and sent all searchers after knowledge to see the young master in person.

But Eugene Hilliard was not one to be lightly turned from aught upon which he had fairly set his mind, and so, almost before she knew it, before she could think of any way to foil his evident purpose, Mary Allen found herself taken in charge and separated from the others. In so small a party this was no difficult matter, but Mary blamed herself for being taken unawares.

Now, there was nothing to do but to submit with the best possible grace, for she could not escape without too plainly showing her fear or dislike. She trusted a little in Tom, and much in her own ladylike arts of self-defense.

For a time she skillfully foiled his attempts to turn the conversation into dangerous channels, fighting gallantly for time, hoping with each passing moment that Tom would remember his pledge and put in an appearance, but Eugene was not in a humor to be denied. He had made up his mind to learn his fate that day, and nothing short of death could alter his purpose.

Mary turned away from the lonely shades where he sought to have her all to himself, and felt more at ease when they passed along the narrow ledge which formed a sort of girdle around the rocky hill rising up from the curve of Horse-foot Lagoon. From here they could look down upon the waters, upon the camp-fire where fat Aunt Marshall was bustling about over the mysterious chowder. From here they could be seen as well as see, and it was with a quiet little vow against further wandering until Tom remembered his promise, that Mary Allen dropped gracefully down upon the moss-grown trunk of a lightning-felled tree.

"Look! Mr. Hilliard," and Mary nodded toward the dark waters where Captain Crisp was just then driving the light canoe here and there with a rare skill and power, apparently to impress the fair maid who sat in the bow. "Is it not a lovely picture?"

"Lovely indeed!" was the prompt response, but his gaze was fixed upon her face rather than upon the scene below. "Mary, why are you so changed? Why are you so nervous of late? One would say you actually feared to find yourself alone with me for a single moment!"

He never made a truer shot in his life, though he did not more than half believe what he said, so blinded was he by his own passions. But of course Mary could not tell him this. If he was a too persistent lover, he was still her host.

"Afraid? Nervous?" she slowly echoed, seeking vainly for words that would be safe and yet not too foreign to the truth. "It must be that I have not yet fully recovered from the shock of that terrible day—or, may it not be your imagination?"

"I wish I could think it was either or both!" and his high brow grew darker, his black eyes filling with a light that was almost savage. "It is not my imagination that makes you avoid me—that makes it almost impossible for me to gain a single word with you alone, Mary! It is not the shock you received that day that causes you to run from me as though you feared to catch the plague were you to pass a single

minute in my company without Tom or Ora at your elbow!"

There was far too much of truth in his charges for her to idly deny them, and at length Mary Allen was forced to abandon her last hope of averting the trial she had for so long foreseen. Her face grew just a trifle paler, and there was a resolute set to her closed lips that should have warned Eugene Hilliard not to press his suit too far at that precise juncture if he wished for success.

If he saw this, he did not heed. There was a spice of the bulldog in his composition, for he seldom relaxed or changed his grip when it was once fairly taken.

He lay at her feet in such a position that it would be awkward for her to rise without he first did so. He cast quick, brief glances up into her face, but for the most part his eyes were on the waters at the base of the rocky hill. His tones were now slow and moody, again rapid and decisive, even eloquent.

"I am growing sick and tired of this life, Mary! At first the change was pleasant enough. It was a new sensation for me to ride over miles and miles of ground, and know that it was all mine, mine as far and further than the eye could reach! It made one feel something like an American king! And I believe I was content until you came, Mary!"

"I can go away again, Mr. Hilliard, and then the olden content will return to your mind," was the quiet reply; not the wisest words she could have chosen, perhaps, but Mary had not yet fully regained her self-control.

"I hope you will," was the swift addition that fairly startled her, it was so unlike the polite young ranchero. "I hope you will—go away with me, Mary! It is a life unworthy us both! It is death in life, rather!"

"It is very pleasant, I should say," and quiet though her tones were, he could see the deep light of earnestness filling her eyes. "If I had my future life to choose—if I could select a place in which to live and die—I know not of another life that would so fully satisfy my soul as life on a ranch similar to this!"

"If, say you, Mary?" and the young ranchero eagerly caught at the chance thus offered him. "It all lies in your own hands, Mary! You have but to say the word—one word, and your dreams of the future are all realized! Say yes to the glad hope that is springing up in my heart—say that you will love me even as I love you, Mary, and—"

He paused short as Mary made a swift, almost imperious gesture with one hand. He turned a shade paler, and the old, vague doubts came back to his heart. She was plainly agitated, but surely it was not the bashful, modest agitation of maiden love!

Mary noted the alteration, and foolishly fancied she could yet avert the crisis for which she was not ready. Hurriedly she uttered:

"Look at Orabel and Mr. Crisp! Is it not a lovely picture? See how charmingly that strip of sunlight contrasts with the dark waters as they lie in the shade! Many a less worthy scene has found immortality on canvas."

Pale, his jaws hard-set, Eugene Hilliard obeyed her, so far as gazing at the picture below them was concerned. And it was this seeming interest which disgusted the Man With a Record and sent him back to shore after the fishing-tackle, under cover of which he fondly hoped to woo and win his fair lady-love.

A short, hard laugh parted the lips of the young ranchero as he followed their movements with his glowing eyes. He saw through the shallow pretense, and knew that Captain Crisp was fishing for more than food just then.

"Look you, Mary, even as you bade me look," he said, his tones low and earnest, showing how deeply his feelings were aroused. "What do you see, Mary? Only the water, the sunlight and shadow, a canoe with a man and woman sitting in it fishing?"

There was no reply. Mary divined how aptly he had caught at her hasty expedient to avoid an answer, and how he hoped to improve it. She cast a longing glance around in search of Tom, but without catching sight of his rotund figure, for just then he was lying below them, moodily watching the same pretty picture, even more sorely troubled than was his little sister.

Her lips came together firmly, and her gray eyes glowed brightly. She had given him a sufficiently plain hint. If he declined to accept it, let him go on and fare all the worse.

"I can see more than this, Mary—much more!" he resumed, after a brief silence. "I can see two lovers, loving and beloved! I can see that their fishing is but a shallow pretense, that they are settling their future, even as I wish to settle ours, my darling."

He cast aside all pretense now. He turned toward her, his dark eyes all aglow with passion. He caught her gloved hand between his, and hurriedly uttered:

"Mary, my precious, my all! have pity on me! I love you madly, insanely, as it sometimes seems to me! I love you—I want you to love me in return. I want you to make me blessed beyond the power of words to portray, by promising to become my wife—my wife!"

His voice sunk lower as he pronounced that

sacred title, and Mary felt a shiver run through his hands as they so tightly compressed hers. She could have told by that how deeply in earnest he was, had she felt a prior doubt. Doubt she did not, had not for weeks. She knew that all the love his passionate, fiery nature was capable of belonged solely to her. Yet the thought did not give her pleasure. Instead, she shrunk from him as though he had showered threats upon her.

Even then the young ranchero did not or would not recognize the truth. He still hoped, still felt that this little woman could not deny him, could not refuse to return his fierce passion. It was so intense that it must force a favorable return.

"Mary, darling, I am waiting for your answer," he said, with a powerful effort calming his mad passions for the moment. "Have you not one word for me? Only one—yet the sweetest, most precious word that ever fell on mortal ears—the word *yes*!"

"That is a word I cannot utter just now, Mr. Hilliard," came the low but resolute reply.

In his surprise and consternation the young ranchero dropped her hands, and as he made an effort to recover them, a moment later, Mary Allen withdrew and placed them behind her, steadily meeting his gaze, so full of wonder, mingled with pain and mortification.

"Mary!" he ejaculated, for the moment forgetting his politeness. "You do not mean it! Surely, I have not heard you aright?"

There was a brief silence which he dared not break. Slowly, surely the scales were beginning to drop from before his eyes, and he to realize what he must long since have discovered but for the mad fever with which his veins had been filled for weeks past. He dared not press her for a repetition of her words, and Mary was also loth to speak.

She gazed steadily yet vacantly down at the occupants of the canoe on the bosom of the Lagoon. One hand stole out from behind her back and slowly, thoughtfully passed across the low, broad brow, as if seeking to clear her troubled brain. And then, low, less firm than usual with her, she spoke again:

"I have tried my best to keep you from speaking out, Mr. Hilliard, ever since you showed so plainly that you were hoping for what could never come to pass."

"Mary, don't say that—don't say that!" Eugene muttered, his voice husky and strained.

"If I say aught, I must speak the truth, Mr. Hilliard," was the grave response. "If my words hurt you, believe me when I say that they give me at least an equal pain, though perhaps after a different sort."

"Then forget that I spoke—let us go on as we have in the past, if you cannot give me the answer I most hunger for, Mary!"

She shook her head, slowly, regretfully, but with a certain decision that surprised him. Deeply as he loved her, Eugene Hilliard had but poorly estimated her real qualities.

"It is too late for that," she said, simply.

"But before I give a final answer to your question, let me clear myself of double dealing."

"You know how long I have known Orabel. You can guess how much I love her, though you can hardly understand or measure the actual depth of that love. And you know how we came here, my brother and I, at her urgent invitation. Would that we had refused it!"

There was something almost akin to despair in the young woman's voice as she uttered these words. Eugene stared, but kept silence. Mary had spoken well when she said that he could not fully understand.

"For poor Tom's sake, not mine," she quickly added, though there came a swift, fleeting flush into her cheeks that seemed like a mute protest. "Poor Tom! he fell in love with Orabel, as I might have foreseen. As I *did* foresee," she corrected herself, with another blush. "I admit it, though it sounds so harsh when put into words! I fancied that I would insure the happiness of the two persons on earth whom I loved with all my heart. I foolishly imagined that Orabel would see Tom as I saw him; that she would forget his homely face and awkward shape in his true nobility of heart and character."

"He is all you say, and yet—" hesitated Eugene, feeling forced to say something as her voice faltered and then came to a pause.

"I know what you are thinking, and I can see now how silly were my hopes," was the calmer continuation. "Orabel is too romantic to fall in love with one so homely, be he never so noble, and my sin has brought its own punishment—not on me, as it should in justice, but on my poor brother."

"Still, when I saw how wholly he was bound up in Orabel, I forced myself to hope for a happy ending. I knew that it would be a death-blow to him if he lost her, and so I remained here, even after I saw that a new and wholly unexpected danger was drawing near. Only for him, I would long ago have taken my departure."

Eugene Hilliard bit his lip until the red blood tinged his teeth, for he could not avoid penetrating her meaning; but he said nothing, and Mary resumed:

"I did my best to further his suit, for I knew that Orabel could never gain a better husband, or one who would make her future more happy. Tom would counterbalance her too great dreaminess. And I almost believe that all would have come around right, only for that luckless accident which brought a stranger before her eyes—only for the coming of her dream-hero, Captain Crisp!"

"I like him as little as you do, Mary!" muttered Eugene, flashing his dark eyes toward the couple in the canoe below.

"I tried to convince poor Tom that his hopes were worse than hopeless, after his coming. I begged him to leave this place and take me back to the old life again, but he was too deeply infatuated, and refused to act wisely. And I could not desert him, you know!"

"Not even to escape from my unwelcome persecutions!" and as he uttered the words, Eugene Hilliard laughed harshly, mechanically.

"Not even for that," was the grave, steady response. "I tried to avert the confession which I knew could bring happiness to neither you nor I. I tried to show you that your hopes were in vain, but—"

"Mary," and the young ranchero rose partly erect, his dark eyes riveted upon her face with an intentness that brought a deep flush to her cheeks. "Mary, have you given me the real reason? Have you been entirely frank with me? Was it hatred for me alone that made you fear to hear me speak out?"

"I do not understand you, sir," she stammered, adding quickly: "I did not say hate. I never hated you, I never can hate you, Eugene!"

It was a frail hope, but he caught at it greedily.

"If I had not been so precipitate—if—Mary, is it the wild, rude life that you object to? Do you dread passing your future on a ranch, remote from all the joys of society?"

An almost dreamy light filled her eyes as they wandered over the lagoon and to the rocky bend beyond. Her voice was low and soft and dreamy as she spoke:

"It is a life that seems to be the most blissful of all—a life that would leave naught to desire! I believe," and she laughed a little constrainedly as the flush deepened upon her cheeks, "that I was intended by nature for a cowboyness!"

"I can offer you all this, and much more, Mary! I do offer it, and I beg of you not to answer hastily. My very life depends upon it!"

"If I answer at all, Eugene, it must be to repeat the words I said at first: I can never love you as your wife should love. And I will never marry a man whom I do not love with all my soul!"

A hot flush leaped into the face of the young ranchero. In those low but intense words, he read her secret, or thought he did. Only a woman who knew what love was, could have uttered them in that tone.

"Because you have learned to love another, Mary!" he cried, his voice ringing with hot, almost savage passion. "Tell me his name!"

Instead of answering Mary started up. One hand pointing downward to the Lagoon, she gasped:

"See! kind heavens save them now!"

The clear report of a revolver, then a savage bellowing and a distinctly audible thrashing in the water were blended with her words. And a wild, strangled shriek came to their ears as Eugene Hilliard turned to behold his sister and the Man With a Record tossed into the agitated waters—to see them vanish amid the spray sent up by that furiously-thrashing tail!

Other eyes still nearer were upon the scene, and rapidly as the young ranchero leaped down the steep slope, Lark Fuller was still more speedy in his movements. Better even than the brother did he realize the peril that threatened the luckless couple. And even as he reached the edge of the water, he saw the dark waters beyond the overturned and crushed canoe parted by hideous objects—the scaly snouts of huge alligators already scenting the fresh blood!

One sharp, clear yell to the cowboys, then Lark Fuller, revolver in hand, leaped far out from shore, disappearing from view only for an instant, then rising and striking out desperately for the dancing canoe.

Taken so completely by surprise, both Orabel and Captain Crisp scarce realized their peril until they were hurled into the water, and both sunk for some little distance, choking, strangling, feeling the water swirl and boil as the death-stricken saurian thrashed blindly about in its agony.

The Man With a Record was the first to come to the surface, and dashing the water from his eyes, he glared about him in search of Orabel, thinking only of her in that critical moment.

He caught a glimpse of a white face, and instantly dove for it, a moment later rising to the surface with the form of the girl tight clasped in his strong arms. He came up near the overturned canoe, and mechanically flung one arm over it, holding the head of his loved one above the water with his other arm.

"Hol' fast, you!" came a ringing shout from midway between his position and the shore where the excited cowboys were busy with

ropes and something which he could not just then make out. "Kick with both feet! Make all the splashin' ye know how! Kick fer your life—fer her life, man, ef your own ain't wuth savin'!"

No time for picking and choosing words then, Lark Fuller knew. He saw those ugly snouts moving toward the as yet unsuspecting Man With a Record, and he knew that the hideous monsters had scented the blood of their death-stricken fellow. Knew that they would not hesitate long before attacking the lovers unless they could be frightened away.

With his feet and his left hand in violent exertion, the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch forced his body high up out of the water, and made a snap-shot at the nearest alligator. Taking sure aim was an impossibility under the circumstances, but Lark gave a grim shout of exultation as he saw the lead strike close to the brain-pan of the monster, giving him such a shock that, though the bullet glanced off without penetrating the thick skull, the frightened reptile whirled about and dove suddenly, sending up a cloud of spray as its serrated tail came in violent contact with the water.

"Kick, you!" he cried, again, almost tempted to turn his pistol on the Man With a Record, who still seemed incapable of realizing the real danger which threatened. "Kick fer her sake, or the 'gators'll git ye both, sure as death! Make a splash, anyhow ontel I kin git thar!"

Shaking the blinding water from his eyes, Captain Crisp glanced hurriedly about him, and for the first time noticed the gathering reptiles, now nearer, plainer, bolder than even before the repulse of their mate by the deft bullet sent by the foreman of Good Enough Ranch. And as he saw one of the hideous monsters open its great mouth, showing the rows of gleaming white teeth, then bringing the monstrous jaws together with a loud clash, he began to realize the full extent of the danger which threatened them, and to comprehend the meaning of the words so sharply hurled at him by Lark Fuller.

It was a frail and slippery support afforded by the overturned canoe, and it was a task even on his steel-like muscles to sustain the head of the almost unconscious maiden above the water, helpless as she was, saturated as her garments were. But the Man With a Record proved equal to the task, and plied his heels with a vigor that sent a cloud of spray and shining drops up into the bright sunlight.

And then Lark Fuller shot in between them and the alligators, rising high enough to send shot after shot from his metallic cartridges until—

One of the reptiles, death-stricken, swung its long tail through the air, and a wail of fear rose from the land as all three persons disappeared amid the spray, forced down to what seemed certain death!

CHAPTER XI.

A LITTLE SURPRISE PARTY.

So swift the stroke that Lark Fuller had barely time to throw himself to one side as the serrated tail thrashed through the air and seemingly fell with full force on the luckless couple still supported by the crushed canoe. He himself in part received the stroke, and for an instant felt that his left arm was disabled, if no worse.

The shock forced him under water for a brief space, but then he came up, glancing breathlessly yet coolly around for a glimpse of the others, Orabel in particular. And a glad cry escaped his lips as, dropping the revolver to which he had clung through all, he dove swift and deep, grasping the maiden even as she was rising toward the surface.

As he broke water again, Lark Fuller shook the dripping drops from his head and face, glancing around just in time to catch sight of the pale face of the Man With a Record as it rose above the surface.

"It's all right! I've got her safe!" the foreman hurriedly cried, rightly interpreting that wild, eager, breathless gaze with which the other swept the surface of the lagoon.

"Thank Heaven!" fervently ejaculated the Man With a Record as he turned quickly in that direction. "I felt her torn from my grasp—I fear my arm is broken!"

"Stick to the canoe if you can't swim, an' kick like thunder!" the foreman of Good Enough Ranch hastily advised. "The boys is comin'!"

"I can swim, and fight for her, if necessary," was the cooler response, as the Man With a Record fairly regained his breath and cast a keen, comprehensive glance about them.

Their peril seemed to be steadily increasing. The surface of the dark waters appeared to be fairly alive with the ugly snouts of the hungry saurians, now and then opening their armed jaws to clash their white teeth together, or to vent a sullen bellow that filled the air with a sickening musky odor. A little awed, perhaps, as yet, but with each moment drifting a little closer to the human bait so unexpectedly placed before them; a little nearer, and then—one swift an' vicious rush would end all!

Lark Fuller placed the unconscious maiden midway between them as they paused at the canoe, and setting the example himself, again bade Cap-

tain Crisp kick and thrash about in the water, to keep the alligators from making their final rush before the cowboys could come to the rescue.

There was but one way in which this could be done, since there were no boats at the lagoon, and no time to stop for building even the rudest sort of raft. That way was shown by the example set by Lark Fuller, and promptly it was imitated by the cowboys, though there was one circumstance, yet to be noted, that delayed them a brief space.

But now, pistols in hand, the gallant men were swimming toward the scene of the overturn with all the skill they could command, some of the most expert now and then forcing their bodies high enough in the air to send a shot or two at the more audacious reptiles.

And then, with a success which Lark Fuller even had hardly dared hope for, the cowboys came up and formed a cordon around the threatened ones, yelling, splashing, shooting, sending momentary consternation into the dull brains of the alligators. With bellows of fear and lashed hunger, they either dove or retreated, and then a wild yell of victory went up from the lips of the reckless cowboys.

"Don't crow too soon, lads," half-laughed their foreman, as he carefully settled the senseless maiden over his left arm and shoulder. "The brutes may make a rush from under water where your yells can't faze 'em. Keep your feet going, an' never mind how much racket you make."

He turned toward Captain Crisp, hurriedly adding:

"Reckon you kin make the shore 'thout help? Ef not, call on the boys an' they won't go back onto ye. An' you, lads," as he struck out from the canoe, swimming steadily, strongly, "see that the dirty critters don't hurt the mistress!"

A general cheer answered him, and the cowboys fell into line behind him, churning the dark waters into froth and spray, keeping a keen lookout for the dangerous reptiles.

One or two offered their assistance to the Man With a Record, but he quietly declined it, swimming in their company, playing his part as well as the rest, despite the apparent difficulty and pain with which he made use of his left arm.

And then, with ringing cheers the shore was reached by Lark Fuller with his precious burden, to be met by Mary Allen, Eugene and Tom. But before any one of the trio could even offer to relieve the foreman of his precious burden, Captain Crisp pressed to his side and muttered:

"She is mine—I claim her now!"

Swiftly those gray eyes, seemingly all the keener for that unlucky cast, sought the pale face of the Man With a Record. Unflinchingly the black orbs met the gray, and there was almost a menace in the former as Lark Fuller seemed to hesitate. Only for an instant, then he relaxed his grasp, and Captain Crisp, taking the limp, dripping figure from his arms into his own, climbed the bank and strode toward the camp-fire.

And it was upon his pale, anxious, handsome face that Orabel's eyes first rested as they opened from her brief swoon. And as she saw the glad light that leaped into his face, all doubts seemed swept away, and once more she saw only her dream-hero, her spirit-lover! And from her pale lips came the soft, tender whisper:

"My hero! My savior! At last I know thee!"

That pale and anxious face lighted up with a joy that was almost intoxicating as its owner caught those passionate words. But what was delicious balm to his heart, proved no less bitter than gall to another, and with a muffled groan poor Tom Allen turned and stole away.

Poor Tom, indeed! Would a malicious fate never tire of persecuting him? Could he never make a move without covering himself with shame and mortification, without making of himself a general laughing-stock?

As before mentioned, the fat and disconsolate lover was watching the occupants of the little canoe, making himself miserable by peering over the walls of paradise into which he was forbidden to enter. And only his awkward figure prevented him from being the very first man to plunge into the waters of the Lagoon to the rescue when the catastrophe occurred.

Forgetting the unfortunate fact that he was wholly unable to swim, thinking only of the peril which threatened the woman he loved with all his honest soul, Tom Allen plunged recklessly into the water, probably led thereto by seeing Lark Fuller take the plunge.

And this it was that had briefly delayed the cowboys from coming to the rescue of their mistress.

Not that Tom Allen appealed to them for help, though his first reckless plunge carried him far beyond his depth and half a dozen yards from shore. The poor fellow had no thoughts for himself. He did not once think of the peril that threatened himself, quite as great as that from which he longed to free the lady he worshipped. He made no effort to return, though his head was quite as often under as above the surface as his short arms vigorously beat the foaming water.

Truly, a ludicrous spectacle he thus presented, and more than one laugh broke from the cow-

boys as they hastily prepared their lariats, not one caring to venture within reach of those wildly-thrashing arms. Yet, the luckless fellow was displaying a degree of heroism that, properly directed, might well have won for him a cross of honor!

A noose was dropped over his head, and he was ignominiously hauled to land, where a stout cowboy dragged him up the steep bank and fairly held him down on his face until all was over but shouting, so desperately did the half-crazed lover struggle to again plunge in to aid in rescuing Orabel Hilliard.

Not until she was safely ashore and recovering her senses did poor Tom fairly realize what a miserable failure he had made of it. And it was with a wish that the earth might open beneath his feet and forever swallow him up that he moved away from the fire, those soft, loving words ringing in his ears like a death-knell.

Mary saw his blanched face, and, fearing the worst, knowing how desperately the poor fellow loved the fair maiden, she followed him, and refusing to be shaken off, clung to him until her womanly arts in a measure calmed his emotions.

"If that infernal fellow—may his happiness break his neck!—was only half-way worthy the darling!" poor Tom groaned, writhing and doubling over like a luckless being with the colic. "If he could even love her as she deserves to be loved—as I could love her, if she would only let me!"

And then—but we will linger no longer. After all, though he was so unfortunate in giving it expression, poor Tom loved Orabel so truly, so intensely, so unselfishly, that it is a shame to hold him up to ridicule.

As soon as she could control her agitation, good Aunt Marshall drove away all of the sterner sex, and under her administrations, Orabel quickly became her usual self, though she presented a truly unique appearance as she emerged from the little brush hut, clad in dry garments which had about equally been contributed by Mary Allen and Mrs. Marshall. But no one laughed more merrily than she, and soon all restraint born of that unfortunate adventure vanished, and the picnic promised to become a success, after all!

Was it luckless? For one, the Man With a Record believed he had far more cause to bless than curse the unforeseen accident that had so nearly changed mirth into mourning, life into death. For now all doubt seemed to have fled from Orabel's mind and heart. The vaguely troubled look which had filled her great eyes as she strove to answer the Man With a Record, no longer existed. In its place came perfect trust, perfect confidence. And Captain Crisp knew that could he repeat his proposal then and there, his answer would be the very one he had begged of her while out upon the dark waters of the Lagoon.

But he was given no opportunity for repeating the question, since Mary Allen clung closely to the side of her friend during the brief interval before dinner, and all his efforts to draw Orabel aside long enough for his fate to be decided, came to naught.

Mary possibly divined his wish, and it may have been a little bit of spite against the man who had so wholly defeated her brother that led her to so innocently foil his wishes, but it was quite as much for her own protection that she kept so close to the side of Orabel. She feared to have Eugene again open that unwelcome subject, and she chose the poorly concealed impatience and even frowns of the Man With a Record in preference.

Both Orabel and Eugene were feverishly brilliant during dinner, and in their gayety the doleful dumps of Tom Allen, the nervous quietness—no other term will so closely express what I mean—of Mary, and the gravity of the Man With a Record passed by without notice, or if noticed, without remark.

To one side, the cowboys were hugely enjoying their portion of the feast, feeling very well satisfied with themselves and all the world, though their chief was not among them. Indeed, no one could say with certainty where he had gone or when.

No one had seen Lark Fuller since he so quietly gave way to the almost fierce claims of the Man With a Record. He was not to be found when Orabel, learning the whole truth of her rescue, sought to find him to give him her heartfelt thanks for his bold efforts in her behalf.

"Gone home after a bundle of dry-goods for your precious self, pet, I'm open to wager," laughed Eugene Hilliard. "He's a man that never forgets or overlooks anything, no matter what happens. An earthquake couldn't disturb his mental balance, whatever it might do to his physical equilibrium!"

"A true word, even though spoken in jest, Mr. Hilliard!" exclaimed Mary Allen, flushing a little as all eyes were quickly turned upon her. "Unless I am greatly mistaken, there is metal such as heroes are made of, beneath that cool, calm exterior."

"A rough diamond, beyond a doubt," gently uttered Captain Crisp.

Mary flushed, an almost angry glow coming

into her eyes as she glanced toward the handsome speaker. Yet why should she take offense? Surely the words were complimentary. And even if they were not—

Eugene Hilliard frowned blackly, all his forced gayety vanishing before a sudden wild suspicion. And yet—it could not be! Take a fancy to that rough, ugly, squint-eyed fellow? Bah! he was growing foolish to even think of such a preposterous impossibility!

Shortly after the feast was over, Lark Fuller made his reappearance, fully confirming the careless compliment paid him by the young ranchero. He bore a satchel containing fresh and dry articles of clothing, packed up by one of the maid servants left behind at the ranch.

"Beg pardon ef I've overdone my duty, ma'am," he said quietly as Orabel gazed at him in surprise. "I thought mebbe you'd be better suited, an' though it's warm enough now, these evenin's is mighty bad fer ketchin' cold ef one ain't keerful."

"It is not that, Mr. Fuller," and the voice of the maiden trembled a little as her bright eyes moistened. "I am thinking how to thank you for your gallant efforts to preserve my life when—"

"I wouldn't take the trouble, ma'am," was the cool interjection. "I'm hired to do my duty. That was part of it, an' I only done what any man would 'a' done in my place. It raily ain't wuth the trouble, ma'am. It cost me nothin'."

Though respectful enough in tone and manner, somehow this quiet speech chilled the maiden, and she drew back a little. Lark Fuller cast a swift glance around them, as though to make sure there were no listening ears inconveniently near, then muttered without a muscle of his face betraying the fact to whoever might be watching:

"You'll find a note inside the grip, ma'am. He axed me would I beg you to keep his secret fer a little bit."

The foreman of the Good Enough Ranch bowed slightly, replacing his hat and strode over to where the cowboys were still lingering over the feast, joining them without a word of explanation concerning his absence.

Puzzled, startled, Orabel carried the satchel into the little hut. She found the note to which Lark Fuller alluded, and opened it with a stifled cry of pleasure. And as she read the doubtful look gradually gave place to one of pleased anticipation.

Although before dinner, Orabel had positively declared that on no account would she permit the original programme to be changed because of the accident; now that she reappeared, once more her neatly dressed self, she soon broached the subject of her return, playfully carrying it over the faint objections which were but the echo of those she had herself brought forward a short period before. And when Eugene rather tartly reminded her of this, she gayly replied:

"I am a woman, therefore not to be bound by sober reason. Then I wished to stay, now I wish to go, and who shall say me nay?"

"Not I, certainly, though it will be many a long day before I can forget Horse-foot Lagoon!" softly uttered the Man With a Record, his glowing eyes saying far more than he dared permit his tongue to utter.

"Nor I, if a woman be permitted to vote," promptly cried Mary, eager to return to the ranch, where she could so much more readily avoid a reopening of that painful subject.

Neither Tom Allen nor Eugene made any further objection, and so the willful beauty carried her ends, and ere long they were all in the saddle, riding gayly toward Good Enough Ranch.

Never had Orabel looked more lovely. Never had she been so brilliant, so gay, so full of life and sparkle. It was as though her bath in the dark waters of Horse-foot Lagoon had renewed her youth.

Close beside her kept the Man With a Record his handsome face all life and animation, his lustrous eyes constantly repeating the sweet tale his lips dare not utter while others were so near. And poor Tom Allen grew more miserably wretched as he saw this, as he noted the protecting air; the air of one who felt he had won the right to assume it.

Mary was more than usually talkative, too, though it was with a feverish brightness foreign to her usually quiet, demure manner. And had she been less proudly happy, had she been less intent on the little surprise party that she had in view, Orabel must have noticed this alteration in the manner of her bosom friend, and would have made a pretty accurate guess as to its cause.

At a covert sign from her, Lark Fuller sped on ahead of the party, reaching the ranch some little time ahead of the rest. He was standing before the door, ready to take charge of their horses when they came up, and a barely perceptible motion of his head told Orabel all she wished to know.

She saw Mary safe in her own room, then, without waiting for any of those little confidences which would naturally have followed, she hurried away to her own chamber, knocking at the door and whispering:

"It is I, you dear old darling! Please, may I come in?"

The door opened, and Orabel was tightly clasped in a strong embrace. And one from which she seemed in no great hurry to free herself, either.

It was a man who held her in that bear-like hug, and the same one who wrote the note so deftly delivered by Lark Fuller. A lover, too, though the frosts of more than half a century were sprinkled over his shaggy locks and monstrous beard.

"Well, birdy, glad to see the old bear, are you?" he uttered in a ludicrously deep and resounding whisper.

And blushing as those hairy lips came in contact with hers, Orabel slipped from his grasp, tapping his lips with one little hand, trying to frown and making a lamentable failure of it.

"Bear indeed! Bearish in manner as in looks, and above all bearlike in voice! What is to become of your cunning surprise, if you lift the house-top with those awful lungs of yours?"

"He's down there, then? My gallant Man With a Record?"

Orabel nodded, clapping one hand over her lips to stifle the glad, merry laugh that would bubble forth.

"There, and all unconscious of the glad surprise which awaits him, Papa Hurly-burly! Won't his great black eyes open, though?"

"I reckon they will, birdy," more quietly uttered the giant, as he dropped down in a chair, passing one huge hand over his tangled beard.

A king among men was Hurley Burr, the old friend and one-time partner of Morris Hilliard. A giant in size, over six feet in height, and with enormously broad and powerful shoulders, with a chest such as a grizzly bear might have envied, and arms like weavers' beams.

His large head, was covered with a shaggy, grizzled mane that gave him a leonine look, and a full beard swept over his swelling bosom almost to his waist. From out of this forest of hair there shone eyes of deepest, darkest blue, full and bold, yet at times with the mildness of a gentle woman. His large nose was slightly curved, lending strength and decision to his large face.

His garb was rough, yet of good quality, such as a rich stockman might wear. And about his capacious waist was a belt of arms, its contents chosen rather with an eye to service than mere show. On his feet were heavy riding-boots, dusty and showing the effects of a long ride.

"To think that you should come just at this time of all others!" exclaimed Orabel, clasping her hands with suppressed rapture. "How he will stare when you step into the room! It will be a fitting climax to a day of joy and pleasure."

"You've been happy, then, and the old bear away, birdy?" asked Hurly-burly, with a softened cadence.

"Not so happy but that I have often wished and hoped for your return, Papa Hurley," and Orabel caught his shaggy beard in both her hands, holding him thus while her red lips pecked at his brow.

"And this hero of ours, birdy? You have found him all that fond fancy painted him?"

"More—a thousand-fold more, Papa Burr!" murmured Orabel, hiding her face in his broad bosom, the better to conceal the burning flush that came into it as she recalled those words on the Lagoon.

A bright glow filled those big blue eyes, and as though he did not care for it to startle her, Hurley Burr clasped her closer to him with his strong arms. His voice was low and subdued as he spoke:

"I couldn't stay away when I heard that my Man With a Record had at last put in an appearance, birdy, and so—here I am. I warned the servants that I'd bite their heads off if they so much as let a word or a hint drop to spoil my little surprise party—for I do want to take the dear fellow by surprise, birdy! It will be good as a feast!"

"And you shall have your wish, big bear!" withdrawing from his fatherly embrace. "I will go down first, and keep him engaged so that he will suspect nothing until you come in full view. It is no more than right," and she flushed divinely, as her sparkling eyes drooped again with maidenly shyness. "He gave me great joy this day. I will give him great delight this evening, through you, his almost father!"

"Hurry along, birdy," muttered Hurly-burly, burying his face in a mammoth handkerchief and blowing a smothered blast. "I'll wait a few minutes before following after."

"I'll tap on the door when Mary Allen is ready to go down. You can follow in five minutes. I will have Captain Crisp with his back to the door, when you enter. And then—then!" she laughed merrily, her dark eyes sparkling as she kissed him once more, then fled from sight.

Her delight was such that Mary grew suspicious to the verge of taxing her with breaking the sacred pledge which they had formed in the old school-days, but Orabel laughingly bade her wait, and hurried her down to the large dining-room, where good Aunt Marshall had already prepared supper for them all.

Captain Crisp came forward to meet Orabel, his fine eyes filled with love that she could not

mistake. At any other time, Orabel might have found it a more difficult task to keep him in play, such delicious confusion filled her happy heart, but thinking all the time of the charming surprise which impended, she played her part to perfection. And when Hurley Burr softly opened the door of the dining-room, his entrance was wholly unsuspected by the Man With a Record. And if he had caught the sounds of approaching footsteps, he would not have turned just then, while Orabel held his hand in hers, a bright blush suffusing her face.

"This has been a day of surprises, Captain Crisp," she said, joy filling her rich, mellow voice. "And the greatest of all is yet to come. Think! whom would you rather see—but I'll not keep you in suspense. Turn, behold, and thank me for—"

As she spoke, Orabel playfully turned the Man With a Record about, so that he fairly faced the giant, but her speech came to an abrupt ending, and a cry of wonder and doubt took its place.

For instead of rushing into each other's arms, the two men stood still their eyes meeting with anything but glad delight. And the Man With a Record even shrunk back a pace, his face turning ghastly white, one hand raising to his bosom as though his heart was troubling him!

What could it all mean?

Hurly-burly was the first to make a move. His eyes glowed vividly and his strong, deep, rumbling tones broke out as he strode forward with outstretched hands.

"My dear fellow! Not a word for your second daddy, old Hurly-burly the Grizzly? Not even the touch of an honest palm? You cur! You cheat! You unmitigated fraud! You ass in a lion's hide! Now you have got it!"

Mechanically Captain Crisp extended one hand, to have it clasped as in a vise. Then with a fierce jerk he was drawn close up to the enraged giant, whose broad palm swept through the air and struck him on one cheek and then the other, with a savage force that bade fair to send his head flying from his shoulders! And then, as those fierce yet contemptuous epithets shot through his bearded lips, Hurly-burly swung the half-stunned wretch around, and stepping back a little, swung forward one heavy boot, sending the Man With a Record end over end across the room, to fall in a quivering heap in the corner!

Poor Orabel stared aghast, then a wailing cry escaped her lips, and but for the ready arms of Tom Allen, she must have fallen to the floor.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ROGUE'S MARCH.

A SURPRISE-PARTY, sure enough, and one which would not soon be forgotten by any of those more immediately concerned.

"Such infernal impudence beats the very devil!" exploded Hurly-burly, giving his head a toss that sent his grizzled mane flying. "The likes o' him taking on the name of a gentleman! Claiming to be my Man With a Record! Buz-zing his cunning lies into the ears of my birdy! If I wasn't mild as milk and peaceful as a sucking dove, I'd boot the low-down cur from this to sunset and back again!"

With his great eyes aglow, his nostrils quivering, his huge hands closing and unclosing spasmodically, his entire frame shaking with just indignation, Hurly-burly cast one burning glance toward the prostrate figure in the corner, then turned his back upon it, to utter a cry of mingled alarm and self-reproach as he beheld poor Orabel sinking into the arms of Tom Allen, the only one of the party who seemed more glad than astonished by this strange outburst.

"Don't, birdy! don't take it so hard!" muttered the giant, all fire and violence vanishing like magic from face and voice. "It's hard, I know—but it had to be done—it *had* to be done, and I thought—"

"Just like a man!" almost snapped Mary Allen as she brushed between and while catching the fluttering hands of Orabel, flashing an indignant glance over her shoulder at Hurly-burly. "Great, blundering creatures—go away, can't you? Do you want to drive her crazy?"

Never a word spoke Eugene Hilliard, the double surprise seeming to fairly deprive him of speech, if not of the powers of locomotion.

He sat staring at the figure in the corner, which was now beginning to move, to struggle to its feet, seemingly unnoticed by any other in that moment of utter dismay and confusion. He caught a glimpse of the pale face, now that of a veritable demon as it turned toward the lion-maned giant whose finger-prints were burning redly on each cheek. His lips parted, but he seemed incapable even of uttering a cry of warning as there came a bright gleam of polished metal.

His brain whirling, his bodily powers terribly shaken by those heavy blows and heavier kicks, Captain Crisp staggered to his feet and glared about him, singling out the figure of Hurley Burr, whose broad back was just then turned toward him, who was wholly absorbed in his fears for poor Orabel.

That was all the unmasked impostor saw or cared to see just then. All was forgotten save a burning thirst for revenge on the man who had so adroitly entrapped him, who had so mercilessly unmasked him just as his audacious schemes bade fair to prove a complete success. And jerking a silvered derringer from his bosom, he staggered forward, a venomous curse hissing through his teeth, his black eyes fairly red with his wild passions, covering that broad back, resolved to make sure of his revenge, let the consequences be what they might.

Better for his hopes had he risked a snap-shot the instant he regained his feet, for now a sturdy figure leaped between him and his intended victim, a strong hand knocked up his weapon, the heavy bullet piercing the ceiling as the weapon was twisted from his grasp, and then a deft foot knocked the feet from under him, two strong hands twisted him to the floor, and Lark Fuller added his own weight to the fall. A brief struggle, and then the foreman of Good Enough Ranch arose, leaving the panting, cursing wretch lying on his face, his hands drawn behind his back and fastened together with heavy handcuffs!

"Good boy, Lark!" rumbled Hurly-burly as he whirled about at the explosion, instantly divining from what he had been saved by the cross-eyed foreman. "I owe you one for that, my lad!"

"Never mention it, boss. It cost me nothing," lightly responded Fuller. "The pizen critter was so wild I didn't know but what he might hurt somebody with his keerness, an' so I downed him, easy as I knowed how."

Hurly-burly seemed to forget all else as his great blue eyes fixed on the ironed figure lying on the floor, and striding forward, one harsh thrust of his foot rolled the detected villain over on his back. And with one foot planted on his heaving chest, holding him helpless as though in the stocks, the enraged stockman thundered:

"You low-down scoundrel! I'd give a hundred beeves for words to fitly express my opinion of you, though I doubt if the human language contains epithets low and vile and cursed enough to half do the subject justice!"

"Beggin' pardon, boss, but ef you feel so mighty sure, mebbe it'd be all fer the best ef you was to putt off the tryin' ontel some other time when you feel better able fer to do him good," ventured Lark Fuller, in a low, guarded tone, at the same time casting a meaning glance over his shoulder to where poor Orabel was under the tender care of Mary Allen and Aunt Marshall.

As well attempt to choke a hungry tiger from its bleeding prey by promising it a still choicer feast in the dim future! Heavier pressed the big foot until it threatened to crush in the breastbone of the writhing, struggling wretch whose black eyes were so savagely glaring up at the giant. And in tones deep and almost shaking the walls, Hurly-burly poured out his burning wrath and withering contempt.

"You pitiful cur! To steal the name and fame of a man and a gentleman to masquerade in! To claim the title I bestowed on one who is an honor to his race—you, the lowest of the low! You, the vilest, most contemptible reptile that ever squirmed beneath the foot of an honest man! To steal *his* name, and under its shadow to creep into a decent household and scatter your poisonous slime over everything! To dare pollute the air a lady breathes! To touch her hand, to whisper your cunning and audacious lies into her ear! By the gods! it makes my old heart swell within me until I feel like stamping the very life out of you! You—you—you—"

Hurly-burly could find no word to suit his purpose, and for a little time it seemed as though he must indeed burst if he kept on swelling as he had begun! His indignation was so intense, his powers of language were so poor and contracted, as he then felt. If he could only utter his real sentiments! If he could only empty the hot bitterness that filled his heart to overflowing! But he couldn't. And actually fearing for himself, afraid to linger so close to temptation with his quivering foot so close to that red-streaked face, he turned away, in a husky growl saying to Lark Fuller:

"Take the living carrion away, lad! Drag him out and poison your most worthless curs with him! Glove your hands, man, else you'll not be fit to come inside of four walls this ten year!"

"Off! touch me if you dare, you squint-eyed hound!" grated the foiled schemer, struggling to his feet. "Eugene Hilliard, I call on—"

That was as far as he went, just then. Lark Fuller caught him by the throat with a vigor that at once shut off his speech, that bade fair to forever shut off his wind as well, and thrust him from the room, through the hall and out of the door, giving him not another chance to utter threat or appeal.

The cowboys under lead of Long Tom Deakin, startled by the sound of the derringer shot, were rushing to the spot weapons in hand, but as they recognized the man whom their foreman was handling so unceremoniously, and remembered how they had been called upon to honor and serve him during the past few days, their

amazement checked their rush, and they forgot all else but how to stare, open-mouthed.

"Get my nag, and the boss this critter rid here, then saddle up fer yourselves. We're goin' to take a little ride afore dark," tersely uttered Lark Fuller, still maintaining his grip, still forcing the luckless impostor on, seemingly bound to get him out of earshot of the house before letting up on that choking grip.

"It's the cap'n, or I'm a howlin' liar!" muttered Deakin, for once lost to all discipline.

"An' what a holy tongue he has got!" spluttered one of the other cowboys, gifted with a keen sense of the ludicrous.

Yet there was good cause for his ejaculation, too. That mighty grip was surely doing its work, cool and collected as the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch seemed. And as he peered around the broad shoulder of his charge, Lark Fuller quickly relaxed his fingers.

The tongue was protruding far from the parted jaws. The face was swelling and turning purple. The limbs were trembling, and only for the marvelous strength in those sturdy arms, the wretch must have fallen in a limp and nerveless heap to the ground.

"You heard me talk, I reckon?" sharply muttered Lark, his crossed eyes glowing almost savagely. "Shell I say it onet more, an' say it slow? Git our critters, an' git 'em quick!"

Never before had the cowboys seen their chief so nearly in a fury as now, and the sight was not a reassuring one, bold and reckless though they were by nature. And even Long Tom Deakin, himself a sort of privileged character on the premises, almost broke his neck in his haste to wheel and dash off to the stables where their horses still remained, in obedience to the orders given by Lark directly after their return from Horse-foot Lagoon.

Suffering the limp figure to fall across his broad shoulder, Lark strode on until a corner of the stables hid him from view of the ranch, and then dropped the wretch to the ground. Kneeling beside him, he produced a ready made gag from his pocket, and slipping it between the parted jaws, deftly secured it in a hard knot behind the prisoner's head. Then he rose erect, impatiently waiting for the horses.

Not for long. The cowboys felt that their chief was in an ugly and dangerous mood, and in a remarkably short period of time, they had all in readiness. And then, without asking aid, Lark Fuller lifted the tall figure of the impostor in his arms, placing him in the saddle, securing him from falling by a couple of turns about pommel and cantle with a lariat. And as he thus worked, he saw that his captive was beginning to recover from that terrible grip.

Vaulting lightly into his own saddle, holding the rein of the steed ridden by the impostor, Lark Fuller struck out rapidly along the same trail over which, a few days before, "The Man With a Record" had ridden in triumph, honored and respected, almost loved by at least one fair companion!

Silently, curiously the cowboys followed after in close ranks. If they interchanged inquiring glances, be sure not one of them all gave audible vent to query or reply. Somehow they began to feel that they had never really known this chief of theirs.

Then Lark Fuller broke the silence, turning in his saddle until he could fairly gaze into the livid, ghastly face of his prisoner.

"You played a mighty bold game, Paul Vassall, an' come monstrous nigh winnin' of it, too!" he muttered in those cold, even tones that had grown familiar to those who now listened. "It was high stakes you set your eyes onto, but they're gone ferever from your reach, thank the good Lord!"

As it seemed involuntarily Lark Fuller removed his hat and cast a look upward. Somehow, his words sounded almost like a prayer.

The impostor writhed in his saddle, his black eyes almost starting from his head, his athletic figure swaying from side to side as he desperately strove to lurch his bends, to free his hands, to shake the stifling gag from between his painfully distended jaws.

Lark Fuller sat sideways in careless ease as he silently watched these vain efforts, a cold smile dancing in his gray eyes, playing about his thin-lipped mouth. And not until the prisoner, with a muffled curse of baffled fury, ceased his struggles, did he speak again:

"Pity you wasted all your coolness afore it come to this, Paul Vassall. A little mite wouldn't do you no hurt now. It mought show ye what a fool you was makin' out o' your pritty self, an' sorter ca'm down your 'motions ontel you could take a fair, squar' squint at the game as it now stan's. An' then you wouldn't kick ag'in' the pricks so mighty reckless, mebbe."

If looks had the power to blast, Lark Fuller would never have given utterance to another of his thinly-veiled taunts. The devil was in those viciously-glowing eyes, but the foreman seemed careless of all such threats, his tones cool and steady as before:

"Yes, you made a mighty keen offer fer the pile, Paul, but you slipped short up on it. It wasn't in the keards fer you to win. They's angels o' light who keep guard over the likes o' the

one you tried your level best to cheat an' fool an' drag down to your own level. And when I think of it—when I think how you mought 'a' succeeded in your foul plot, Paul Vassall, I could tear your black heart out by the roots an' ram it down your dirty throat!"

Fiercely Lark Fuller blazed forth, dropping that cool, careless mask for the moment, and showing the startled cowboys a side of his character which they had little suspected. And hardened villain though he had proven himself, even Paul Vassall shrunk back, cowering before the vivid light that flashed from those crooked eyes.

As quickly as he had dropped the mask, Lark Fuller resumed it, all traces of excitement vanishing as though by magic, save that his voice was colder and harder as he spoke on:

"Ef you want to know who putt up this little job onto you, Paul Vassall, I did it. From the fu'st I tuck you fer a snake. From the fu'st I b'lieved you a liar, a fraud, a 'postor. Just why, it wouldn't be so easy to say, but when I once looked into your eyes an' tetched your hand, I felt it was so!"

"It was fer that reason that I didn't come back to the ranch with the rest, that evenin'. It was fer that I rid on an' tuck a look in the timmer whar you said you sot the mistress free. I didn't expect to find what I did, though. I was struck hard when I see the two dead rascals layin' thar, jest as you said; fer I made sure they would hev skun out, leavin' you to make up eyes an' wonder how on airth you could 'a' bin fooled in thinkin' 'em dead. All the same, it didn't quite change my 'pinion as to what you really was."

"Course you didn't stoop so low as to keep the run o' any sech common critters as I was; better fer you ef you hed, mebbe! You didn't know I sot out on a trail, beginnin' with them dead rascals an' runnin' back to a live one, heap more evil then even they ever dare be! Nur you didn't miss the boy, Don Pedro, nuther, though he rid off in a heap hurry with a note to Hurley Burr, axin' him to come straight here ef he wanted to save the young lady he loved like a father!"

Another desperate effort to free himself, ending by recklessly dashing himself toward the speaker, hoping to reach him with his head and thus in part satisfy his burning hatred. But Lark Fuller caught the furious man by the shoulder, thrusting him back without seeming to feel the exertion. And he laughed soft and mockingly, as he added:

"I know jest how you feel, Paul Vassall. I know you would give a good year out o' your life fer jest one fair bite at my throat, ef my hands was tied so I couldn't fight back. Mebbe the time will come; who knows? Fer I didn't bring ye out here to murder ye. That ain't in my line o' business, an' I'd hate monstrous bad to cheat the honest hangman out of his bread an' butter!"

"When I call you by name, you know that I didn't make a 'plete botch o' my trailin', Paul. You kin guess at what I diskivered. That I found out you hed bin seen with those two men you butchered back at the timber island whar you fu'st took up an honest name. That you three left town together, ridin' out this way. An' when I sat down to putt it all together, it didn't take long to see your game."

"You found out in some way how much the young lady thought of the man her father loved. You got hold of enough o' that story to play your part close up to the truth. You hired them two rascals to watch thar chainece an' steal the lady away, an' then you would come in an' play the hero to give you a good knock-down to her."

"They done thar part, an' you done more'n yours. You shot to kill, 'stead of to skeer off, as was agreed atween ye. You thought to save the money you promised them, an' at the same time send 'em whar they couldn't tell no ugly tale 'bout you. That's what I reasoned out, an' ef I was a sportin' man, I'd be willin' to lay big money it ain't very wide o' the truth."

"Though I didn't let on much, I was watchin' yo heap sight closter then ye hed any idee of. I kep' ready to clap a stopper on your didoes ef you tried to win big game off the reel, afore Hurley Burr could git here to make sure I was right in settin' ye down as a 'postor. An' when I give way to ye to-day, it was all the better to make sure of your bitter defeat, for I knowed the old gent ought to git to the ranch by that time. And fer that reason, partly, I rid off when all the party was coddlin' up the mighty hero, fer to set the trap. I did set it. I ketched my varmint, too!"

"An' the next thing is to strip off his pelt, boss!" impulsively cried Long Tom Deakin, no longer able to retain his fierce indignation as he listened to this complete exposure of the audacious imposture.

"It ain't your put, Tom," sharply uttered the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch. "I'm runnin' this game, you want to understand."

Deakin fell back, silenced but not appeased. And of all present, not a single voice would have been raised on behalf of the villain had his death by torture been put to the vote.

"I want you to know jest who you hed to

blame fer your mighty slip-up, Paul," quietly resumed Lark, still maintaining his careless attitude, his weight resting on one foot, his body leaning forward, his crossed eyes watching the livid face of his prisoner. "I wanted to let you know jest whar your hatred an' revenge must fall ef you ever try to git even in this little game. I've done that, now fer business."

"I'm goin' to turn you loose, to go whar you will. But ef you're one inch short of bein' a fool, you'll lose mighty little time in puttin' a long trail atween you an' Good Enough Ranch. You won't come back to these parts ontel you grow tired of livin'. You won't try to trouble any one—any one, mind ye, Paul Vassall!—livin' at Good Enough Ranch, on forfeit of your wuthless life. Fer, I swear to you, by all that honest men respect an' honor, ef you're ever ketched skulkin' 'round this section ag'in, to wuss then kill you! True as I'm a livin' an' breathin' mortal! I'll strip your dirty hide off to make me moccasins out of it! I say it. I mean it. Look out that you don't make me kerry out that oath, Paul Vassall!"

Slowly, clearly, each word sharp and keen, his cross-eyes glowing as though filled with molten metal, Lark Fuller uttered this vow, his forefinger shaking before the livid face of his enemy. And the cowboys, bold and hardened as they were, felt a shiver of awe creeping over them as they listened.

Lark Fuller turned toward them, once more his usual cool, quiet self, and addressed Long Tom Deakin.

"I've said my say, an' now I'm goin' back to the ranch. You will take this 'pizen critter a few miles furdur, an' then turn him loose, but leavin' the gag between his jaws fer him to git rid of the best he kin. Here's the key to his irons. Unlock them, an' throw 'em away. They won't be fit fer no furdur use."

"We kin sorter tell the critter what we think of him, boss?" asked the veteran, with poorly hidden eagerness.

"Fur as words go, sart'in, but look ye, Tom; an' when I say Tom I'm talkin' to all of ye, boys. You're to let the critter go free, alive, safe an' sound in wind an' limb. Ef you don't—ef you cross me in this, no matter how little, thar'll be a right quick settlement with the old man, an' you don't want to fergit it! You know me!"

"Not even a touch o' the lariat? Not even a little back-warmin', so he won't too easy fergit the boys o' Good Enough Ranch?" coaxingly added Deakin, pleading as for a mighty boon.

But Lark Fuller shook his head decisively, saying sharply:

"You've got your orders. Kerry 'em out to the very letter, or it will be all the wuss fer them as comes back to face me. I've said it, an' that settles it fer keeps."

Without another word the foreman of Good Enough Ranch turned his horse, but again halted, to cry out:

"One thing, boys. You'll turn him free now, when you've tuck him a few miles furdur on his way. You won't hurt a ha'r of his head now, but you'll keep a cluss lookout, an' ef you ever ketch him skulkin' 'round the premises, take him in fer keeps! That's all. So long!"

He did not pause again, but rode steadily back to the ranch through the gathering darkness, his head bowed, his brain very busy. And as he caught sight of the bright light shining through the windows, he drew rein, sitting motionless in the gloom for several minutes. Then he gave his impatient horse free rein, riding to the stable, dismounting, unsaddling, caring for the faithful animal before he left.

Once again he paused when at the threshold of the building, and the dim ray of light that fell athwart his face showed it strangely pale and anxious. Again he seemed as though he would recoil from a disagreeable task which he had set himself, but not for long. He gave his sturdy frame a shake, he thrust his fingers through his short hair, then strode forward and entered the building.

He paused at the open door of the dining-room, which also served as the general sitting room. Himself in the shadow, he could see without being seen.

Orabel, her face very pale, her eyes encircled with dark rings, but with her queenly form drawn proudly erect, sat listening to Hurly-burly, who seemed to be whispering to her with a gentleness very rare in one of his boisterous, hurricane nature. Mary Allen was sitting beside her friend, both hands caressing one of Orabel's, silent but deep sympathy in every line of her pale, quiet face.

Eugene Hilliard was rapidly striding to and fro, his face white and hard-set, his dark eyes all aglow, his hands convulsively opening and closing, as usual when in a strong passion.

Tom Allen sat ruefully in a corner, his face preternaturally grave and decorous, but with an occasional gleam in his little eyes that looked very much like a smothered laugh of pure joy!

This much Lark Fuller stopped to see, then he strode into the room and came to a pause as all eyes were turned toward him. If he felt any emotion it was all inward. Outwardly he was cold and quiet as usual, and his voice was the same slow, measured, even one of old.

"Ladies an' you, gents, I come to make a lit-

tle explanation which I feel it is my duty as a hired man to give."

"There is none needed, Fuller!" sharply cried Eugene, with an impatient wave of his hand toward the door. "I will see you presently."

"Beg pardon fer seemin' obstinit, Loss, but I reckon I'd feel better ef I was to say what I come here to say," quietly added the foreman, lowering slightly, but standing his ground. "It won't take long."

"Out with it, then!" angrily muttered the young ranchero. "Out with it, but guard your words! You've made trouble enough for once!"

"I'm sorry ef you look at it in that light, Mr. Hilliard, but what I done was done with a eye to your own good. It was a duty I owed to them that hired me to look after thar interests, an' I cain't say I'm sorry fer what I've done."

"From the fu'st comin', I suspected that man was a 'postor. Of course I couldn't be sure, but it hit me so hard, that I felt in duty bound to 'vestigate it. I fu'st found out that he was lately in comp'ny with them two rascals he killed at the grove. An' then, as one who'd be sure to know all, I sent Don Sancho Pedro with a note to Mr. Burr, axin' would he come here to settle the matter. He came. We planned how to take the feller by surprise, an' you know how it all turned out."

"I'm mighty sorry it did turn out so, but I looked at it as my bounden duty. As sich I did the best I knowed how. An' now it's done, I've only this to say: Ef you think I went too fur, an' stepped over the line o' duty, I want you to say so an' give me my discharge. I'll be waitin' ef you want to say anythin' more to me, boss."

Bowing low, Lark Fuller turned and left the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

HURLY-BURLY SINGS HIS HERO'S PRAISE.

BUT no such message as the one he expected was sent after Lark Fuller that night, nor the next day. Possibly Hurley Burr could have told the reason why, for he certainly lost little time in stoutly defending the actions of the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch after that worthy took his departure.

If Lark Fuller was at all anxious on the point, there was nothing in his demeanor to show it. He went about his business with the same cool, quiet air, respectfully saluting his master or mistress whenever they came near, but showing no signs of wishing to avoid or to seek their presence.

He had a brief talk with Long Tom Deakin about Paul Vassall, and satisfied himself that his orders had been carried out to the very letter.

What Orabel Hilliard endured that night, none save herself and her maker could know. She was pale and listless-looking when she made her appearance at the table in the morning, and Hurly-burly reproached himself bitterly for the part he had played in the little surprise. Not for long, however. For Orabel went straight up to him and kissing his brow, said clearly:

"Papa Burr, I thank you with all my heart and soul for what you have done. It was time you came to look after your birdy! Another day might have been too late. Now—my eyes are opened, and I have dreamed my last foud, foolish dream!"

Never had Hurly-burly listened to more welcome speech than this, and, as he declared, he felt a mountain's weight removed from his spirit.

And thus it came about that after the breakfast things were cleared away, and Hurly-burly had rushed here and there over the premises while smoking his huge pipe, now lanterning some of the cowboys, now talking in rumbling whispers to Lark Fuller, now breaking forth into a song that was much louder than it was musical, to cut this short with a sudden explosion of mighty laughter, fit to shake the hills, as he thought of the blank horror and welfish dismay that came into the face of Paul Vassall as his lady-love turned him about to meet "dear papa Hurly-burly," that there was a party of five once more gathered together in the large room: Eugene and Orabel, Mary and Tom, with Hurley Burr as the center of the group.

"The idea!" and the stockman puffed out his mighty cheeks, knitted his shaggy brows and fairly snorted with disgust at the picture he had conjured up. "How any mortal critter in the full enjoyment of their common senses, could ever make such an outrageous mistake as to accept that shippy, shiny, slobbering animal as a man—as my Man With a Record! How they could be deceived so utterly! How they could take him into their home and into their hearts—well, wonders will never cease while the world exists, they say, and cursed if I don't begin to think the same thing my own self!"

"Why should we doubt, Papa Hurly-burly?" quietly uttered Orabel, and though her face was so pale her tones were steady and even, showing what a complete victory she had won over her poor romance.

"That's the point!" chimed in Eugene, his tones hard and metallic. "He was armed at every point. He knew all about the past. He had papers and documents that seemed to prove him what he claimed. Wiser, more suspicious

persons than we might easily have been taken in by the audacious, plausible rascal!"

"But to mistake pinchbeck for refined gold—Paul Vassall for Willard Crisp!" persisted Hurly-burly, rubbing his grizzled mane until it stuck up like the marvelous *chevelure* of a "Circassian lady."

"Is it so strange, since we have never met your paragon?" Orabel asked, for the first time in her life, probably, alluding to the mysterious Man With a Record with something less than reverence. "We have looked and longed for his coming, but all in vain. We have never seen a picture of him. You have never even told us what color his hair, his eyes, his complexion, or whether he was tall or short, straight or hump-backed! For aught you have told us, Captain Crisp may be an Indian or even a negro!"

Hurly-burly stared at the rapidly-speaking girl with eyes bulging out as though they were on the point of dropping from their sockets. But as Orabel continued, a grim smile came into his face, and as she ended, he lay back in his chair and fairly roared with laughter.

"I'll tell him! I'll write and ask him to settle your doubts as to each and all of these points! I'll make the rascal take oath for your sake that he is neither Injun nor nigger! I'll—"

"Do nothing of the sort, you great mischievous bear!" and Orabel shook him with playful violence, then whispering a few hasty words in his ear as her red lips tapped him on the cheeks.

No one else heard her words, but they could make a tolerably accurate guess as to their purport when Hurly-burly nodded vigorously, frowning portentously as he pressed one finger to his firmly-screwed-up lips.

"All very interesting to you two, no doubt, but I thought we came here to listen to an important revelation," curtly uttered Eugene.

"Because I feared I would have to plead hard to even be blessed with another glimpse of birdy, here," frankly laughed Hurly-burly. "I'm delighted to see that she is proving herself the true child of honest Morris Hilliard, and that she is not going to wear the willow for that infernal, sneaking, scheming cur, Paul Vassall!"

It was an unlucky speech, but Orabel knew that the giant meant well, and she concealed the pang his words gave her. Only Mary knew how sharply they must have stung her pride.

"He can do no further harm, Papa Hurly-burly," she said, her tones calm and unshaken. "Let him pass out of our memory, even as he has passed out of our lives, forever!"

"After I've given one honest fellow his just dues," promptly replied Hurley Burr. "You've got a regular trump in that foreman of yours, youngsters, if you could only realize the fact! Only for him, Paul Vassall might have won his big game, and though I swear I'd have killed him like the cur he is, the very moment I could lay eyes on him, that wouldn't have mended matters much. No; once more, you owe it all to Lark Fuller."

"As the gentleman said last night, it was simply performing his duty, for which our money pays him," sharply uttered Eugene, an angry glow in his dark eyes as he caught the bright smile which came into the pale face of Mary Allen as she listened to those words of hearty commendation.

"Few servants would have taken so much trouble to protect the interests of their employers, though," dryly observed Hurly-burly.

"He runs the risk of losing his situation, as well as of covering himself with ridicule as a visionary dreamer, had his suspicions proved without good foundation. But let that pass. Some day you will do Lark justice, and to the future I am content to leave his case."

"You knew this Paul Vassall before you met, yesterday?" asked Tom.

Hurly-burly nodded vigorously.

"By sight and reputation, both. If he hadn't known of my absence from these parts, and felt sure I would stay away long enough for him to play his rascally game through to the end, the cur would as soon have thrust his head into a red-hot furnace as ventured here! A thief, a blackleg, kicked out of the ranks of decent gamblers, a robber, and a stabber-in-the-neck! That is his record in brief. Of all these crimes he has been guilty, almost beyond a doubt, though his infernal cunning has thus far kept his neck out of the hangman's noose. And to think that he should have the impudence to come here under the name of an honest man! To call himself Captain Crisp! Good—Lord!"

Disgust, rage and humiliation fought for the mastery in those honest eyes and face until it seemed as though the big stockman would suffocate or burst out in a storm that might well shake the stout walls about him. And fearing something of the sort, Orabel moved still closer to his side, her little hand patting his, her voice soft and coaxing:

"Forget him, Papa Burr! Brush him from your mind as I am going to clean his memory from my heart. Forget him, and tell us something about your hero, the real Captain Crisp!"

The scowl suddenly vanished from his face, and a bright, cheerful smile took its place. For

the moment the great rough giant looked fairly handsome, and his voice grew mild and even gentle!

"I don't say you girls will find my hero quite as handsome, speaking from your standpoint, as this impostor. Men that are men don't bother their heads so much about those things. Maybe you wouldn't think him near so smooth and plausible, so much like one of the carpet-knights you read about. But when it comes to solid merit, to honest manhood and genuine worth, my Man With a Record lays over them all!"

"So papa thought, and so he told me in his letters. I have often wished I might meet Captain Crisp, if only to thank him for the great services he rendered poor father, but it seems as though that meeting is further away than ever!"

"Maybe not," and Hurly-burly nodded owlishly. "I'm living in hopes, birdy, even if I have to die in despair. I've been trying to coax the obstinate fellow to show himself, but he won't promise to—"

Orabel, flushing and her eyes filling with something of the old proud hauteur, interposed quickly:

"Not in my name, I trust, old friend! Though I would be glad to see the gentleman, for dead father's sake, I would not have him think—"

"That you are one whit short of absolute perfection, and that he never will, birdy!" laughed Hurly-burly, shaking all over with mirth. "You have accused me of singing his praises, in season and out, but what I've said in his praise is only a drop in the bucket to what I have told the dear fellow about you—and never the ghost of a lie in either case, as I'm a hairy old sinner! You as a woman, he as a man, are both as near perfection as can be in this mortal world! And I'll lick any one that dares even hint at the contrary!"

Mildly ferocious he looked as he glared around from his shaggy, pent-house eyebrows.

"Knowing how perfectly correct is your judgment in one case, I am quite content to take the rest for granted," meekly murmured Orabel.

"Why shouldn't you?" was the blunt response, Hurly-burly apparently not noticing the veiled sarcasm. "Who should know the lad better than old Hurly-burly? And if I do say it that had ought to keep still on his own merits, where will you find a better judge of what a man ought to be, than this same big bear?"

"Modesty, go hide thy diminished head!" muttered Eugene, softly.

"Which proves that envy is still alive and kicking," bowed the big stockman, pointedly. "But there is something I wanted to say in particular, if you hasty young heads will only suffer me to get in a word edgewise."

"About the Man With a Record?" half-sneered Eugene, who seemed to be in an unusually unpleasant mood this morning.

Until now Tom Allen had maintained silence, but apparently in the hope of pouring oil on the waters which even he could not help seeing were threatening to grow more and more troubled, he ventured to ask:

"If it is not a secret, dear sir, where is the genuine Captain Crisp?"

Poor Tom! Always unlucky, even when he meant the best!

"You tell!" fairly snorted Hurly-burly, jumping up from his seat and striding back and forth, his long arms swinging violently, his face working with mingled impatience and disgust. "In hiding, that's where he is! Hiding like a criminal! Hiding like a coward! Confound him!"

"Papa Burr!" softly chided Orabel.

Hurly-burly ceased his mad prancing to and fro, a sheepish laugh in his great blue eyes as he returned to his seat and yielded to her almost magical influence.

"Papa Burr, what do you mean? In hiding? For what reason?"

"That is mainly what I wanted to tell you, birdy," was the reply, and Hurly-burly caught both of her hands in one huge palm, an earnest light filling his eyes as they watched her closely. "And as we are all good friends here, I'll out with the whole truth at once."

"You know what your father thought of Willard B. Crisp. You know that he learned to love him as few men can ever love another of their own sex. You know, too, what good cause he had for this affection. You know how they first met, how Crisp, himself sorely wounded, risked his life time and time again rather than desert the stranger who must have been butchered but for him. You know how he carried your father off on one arm, fighting a host of devilish Greasers with the other, and in the end whipping them all! The most glorious fight I ever heard of! Enough in itself to stamp him a hero of the first water—to give him a record that will outlast the stars!"

"You know all this, but you can't know all that Willard Crisp was to your father while he was fighting against hard luck, trying to win back a fortune for his children. You can't even begin to imagine all that he did, all that he proved himself in those black days. And I

can't even begin to tell you, though I have the record written down on my heart, clear as the light from heaven itself."

"But do you know your father loved Captain Crisp, and that he poured forth some of that love in the long letters he sent you, when he fondly fancied the time was drawing nigh for your meeting, never again to part in this world. Poor Morris! even then the hand of death was upon him!"

"I was his second best friend in those days, and many an hour have we sat in silence listening to Morris Hilliard talking of his children whom he loved so dearly. And many a time have I heard him wish and almost pray that when the good time came to you all, you, birdy, might take a fancy to the Man With a Record, strong enough to bind you to him through life!"

Orabel lowered her face, flushing deeply, then turning pale as death. She remembered how often she had dreamed of much the same thing, and then she thought of the impostor who had, solely through his fancied claims on her through the past, almost won her love.

Hurly-burly saw her change of countenance, and shrewdly suspected something of the truth, but he made no sign. He believed his present course was the best, the surest manner of killing the past.

"And one day Morris Hilliard called me in to witness his last will and testament, not that he or I even dreamed that the end was so close at hand! He was so strong, so hopeful, so happy, and content that at last he could see clear daylight before him!"

"He told me all his hopes and wishes, plainer even than he had ever done before. I witnessed the will which gave you two children all this property, and then, on the same day, I witnessed another will."

"Not his—not father's?" cried Eugene, turning pale as death.

"Let me do the talking, please," slowly uttered Hurley Burr, his tones as grave as his face. "I know what I am saying, and I am prepared to furnish the proof when the proper time comes. I witnessed two wills for your father on that day."

Eugene sunk back into his chair, gnawing fiercely at his thumb-nail, a reddish glow in his black eyes. What did all this mean? Was a long suspended blow about to fall upon his head now, just when he was least prepared for it?

"Orabel, pale but interested, sat watching the face of the great stockman in silence. Puzzled, feeling in the way, but not daring to show their thoughts by attempting a retreat, Mary and Tom sat still, waiting."

"In justice to myself, birdy, I must tell you that when your father explained all his reasons to me that day, I reasoned with him the best I knew how, and even begged him to alter his mind. I told him that what he hoped and longed for might be brought to pass by other and simpler means, which could not possibly leave a sting behind; and this last whim of his I feared would do that, if no worse."

"I said all I could to shake his determination, but it was breath wasted. Morris Hilliard was slow to resolve, but when his mind was once made up, nothing short of an earthquake could shake him."

"He said that his dearest hope in life was to see you, Orabel, wed Willard Crisp. He said the young man was as dear to him as though the same blood flowed in their veins. He wanted to give him all the help he could, and believed that by so expressing his wishes, you would be more likely to agree to fulfill them. And so, in that, his latest will, he gave one half of his fortune to Willard Crisp, should you refuse to marry him!"

A harsh laugh broke from the lips of Eugene Hilliard.

"At last the mighty secret is out! At last we know the real reason why this mighty Man With a Record has kept himself so shady. Now we know why he is in hiding, as you so aptly expressed it. He is hiding—he is waiting patiently in hopes that Orabel will wed, and then he will come and demand his plunder. Married, of course she cannot wed him!"

"Eugene! brother!" exclaimed Orabel, flushing painfully.

"Let him go on, birdy," coolly uttered Hurley Burr. "It's natural enough, after all. And, to tell you the simple truth, he's more than half right in his guess, though he might put it into smoother terms."

"You too, Papa Burr!" exclaimed Orabel, now really excited. "You turn against the man you call your friend? You accuse him of being such a contemptible, mercenary wretch?"

What a hearty roar went up from those mighty lungs!

"Takes a woman to leap at a conclusion a man wouldn't be able to see with a spyglass," he laughed, rubbing his mighty hands together in high glee. "More than half right, I said, and I repeat it without even the ghost of a blush. Captain Crisp is in hiding, and hiding because of that very will! And he has that will in his own possession, too, unless he has destroyed it."

"Very apt to, I should say!" snapped Eugene. "If so, it wouldn't be the strangest fact connected with the mixed-up affair," coolly retorted Hurly-burly. "Now go on. Have your say out in a single innings. I'm tired of being interrupted and so I'll just lay back and listen until you are through. Don't hurry yourself, I beg. Take your own time, but get through before I begin. Will you?"

Instead, Eugene rose from his seat, and left the room, fearing to remain while such bitter passions were seething in his heart. He saw that he had already lost ground in the eyes of the woman he loved, and he feared to come to even worse if he remained.

"Never you worry on his account, birdy," and Hurly-burly checked Orabel as she made a move as though she would follow her brother. "Let him sulk it out alone, and he'll be all the more ready to listen when you know just how to explain it all to him."

Orabel sunk back in her seat, strangely interested in the matter. But through it all, she never once thought evil of the Man With a Record. That very record forbade.

"It's a shameful fact that Captain Crisp is lying low, in hiding, but not with the rascally purpose attributed him by Eugene. Though I don't approve of it—though I've tried my level best to get him to come out and openly face the music—he refuses. I'll tell you why."

"The lad didn't listen to your praises for so many hours without taking a deep interest in the subject. I soon saw this, and I watched him closer than he thought, at the time. I saw that he was growing to love the one his old friend so loved, and I was as glad as Morris was when he also made the discovery."

"I really believe we both knew this long before the lad himself made the discovery. He was so quiet, so modest. And I know that when we showed him we knew what filled his heart, he tried to run away from us and from himself! But that soon grew off, though he would look very grave when he spoke of his winning you for a wife. He felt so unworthy such a precious prize, he said, and he meant all he said, too!"

"Well, when that will was signed and sealed, Morris Hilliard told Willard what he had written, and told him how dearly he longed for his dream to become a reality. The lad listened kindly, but said nothing. He was too gentle, too kind at heart to say aught that could hurt his old friend. But afterward, when we were alone, he told me all. He knew that it could never come to pass. He felt that even if you were to yield, it would be because of what your father had written in his praise, not because of his own merit. And though he felt that a union with one so pure, lovely, true-hearted as he felt you were, would be like heaven upon earth, it could never be."

"Even then I didn't know how settled he was in this. Not until I found a note on my desk, telling me that he had gone away, never to return until he could see his way clearer. He told me to soften the blow to your father, as best I could; he left all to my judgment."

"I didn't tell your father, for soon he was taken ill, and died in my arms, happy in the thought that at least your future was provided for. And then, one night soon after Willard paid me a short visit, in disguise. And when I awoke in the morning he was gone. The will was gone with him! That looks dark, but I never doubted him then, nor have I ever doubted him since. Let what will happen, he will never make a crooked use of that document."

Orabel caught his hand and touched it to her lips. Her dark eyes were glowing, and there was a bright smile upon her face as she said:

"I thank you, Papa Burr! Like yours, my faith in the Man With a Record is perfect! I am content to wait, even as I have waited for long years. I know that he will come, in his own good time, and then—"

"And then, birdy?" eagerly breathed the big stockman, his blue eyes flashing, his face working with emotion strange in one of his size.

"And then—we shall see what we shall see, Papa Hurly-burly!" was the laughing response.

Poor Tom! No sooner was one obstacle cleared from his path to paradise, than another and still more formidable one dropped down to bar the way! He knew what that glad smile portended. He knew that, just as she had when the false Man With a Record came across her path, Orabel would fall captive to the genuine, with hardly a struggle. And he smothered a hollow groan in his throat as he rose and stole on tiptoes out of the room, Mary alone noticing his retreat. And full of pity for the poor fellow, she also beat a retreat, leaving Orabel and Hurly Burr the sole occupants of the room.

"Let them go, birdy!" muttered the giant as Orabel half started from her seat as though to follow. "You have laughed, now let's have a bit of sober earnestness. If he does come—if he comes to you as a man should, and says he loves you as a man loves the woman he wants for a wife, what answer would you give me here?"

"Which do you think would please him best, Papa Burr? An answer sent through you, or one direct from my own lips?" slowly asked Orabel.

"From yours, of course—who wouldn't?"

promptly replied the big fellow, falling head-long into the cunning trap.

"Then—I'll wait until he comes before replying!" laughed Orabel, kissing him swiftly and then running from the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

PAUL VASSALL CRACKS HIS WHIP.

"WELL, I'm here! Now what do you want with me?"

"First, to follow me to a place where we can talk after a cosy fashion without fearing every other word will be caught by ears that have no right in the game. Come on!"

"If I don't see fit?"

"I think you will see fit, my dear fellow. I don't believe your brain has quite given way under the unequal task you have set it: how to make one man equal to two charming women!"

It was a risky speech to make, and Paul Vassall knew that as sure as the wisest of men could have told him. But he was desperate, after a certain cold, calculating fashion, and felt that the ends to be gained quite justified the risks he was running.

For one moment he stood gazing firmly into that pale, agitated face, then turned on his heel and strode away, confident that he had not cracked his whip in vain.

And Eugene Hilliard followed after, one hand now and then convulsively clutching at the haft of a knife or the polished butt of a pistol, terribly tempted to add murder to his other sins. But he did not. Perhaps the very coolness with which Paul Vassall disregarded danger had its effect in restraining that blow.

Seated in a small, but not uncomfortable room, on opposite sides of a little round table supplied with liquor, glasses and cigars, the master and slave regarded each other as though curious to note the alterations which had taken place since they last met, on the evening when Hurly-burly tore the mask from the face of the audacious impostor.

Paul Vassall showed slight change. Perhaps his face was a little harder, a little less genteel, because now he took no trouble to look pleasing. His eyes were hard and merciless, and few who gazed into them now could have called them beautiful or even attractive. His garb was of a somewhat flashy order, rich and new, like that of a gambler who has struck a rich and paying streak of luck.

Eugene Hilliard, on the contrary, was looking much the worse for wear. It was easy to see that he had been "hitting the bottle" quite heavily, though he was not just what one would call drunk. His face was lined and almost haggard, and there was a smoldering fire in his eyes that told of sleepless nights and restless days, that warned Paul Vassall that his one-time slave might readily become his master should he fail to play his cards properly.

"You received my note, then, Hilliard?"

"If not, would I be here?" growled the young ranchero.

"Why not?" and there was a mockery in the uplifting of those black eyebrows. "Is it so strange for a dear friend and brother-in-law to make a social call?"

"Go slow, Paul Vassall!" and there leaped a dangerous light into those haggard eyes. "There's some taunts I'll never take, even from you. You don't want to crowd me too close to the wall!"

The villain flung out one hand with a hard, contemptuous laugh.

"You are in a terribly captious mood, all of a sudden, dear fellow! Dangerous? You dangerous? Bah! and there was bitter scorn and hatred in both face and tones as he leaned across the table, those glowing black orbs watching his companion with savage intentness. "As dangerous as you were on that evening when you stood by and watched those hounds of Hades double-bank me! Stood by like a trembling craven, and spoke never a word, lifted not even a finger to help the man you had so solemnly vowed to aid through all, to the very end! Dangerous, you?"

"More so than you thought, even then, you infernal scoundrel!" and something like a laugh followed the words, though there was precious little of mirth in the sound. "I had a hand on a pistol, and the devil kept whispering in my ear to draw and shoot! If I had—well, I know who would have chewed the lead!"

"And I can make a tolerably shrewd guess," promptly responded Paul Vassall, though his face turned a shade paler, for until this moment he had never suspected as much, never realized how narrowly he had escaped then, how near he was to losing his most valued slave now!

"Then go a little slow, or maybe I'll be tempted to cover my mistake even at this late hour," growled the young ranchero.

Paul Vassall poured out a couple of glasses of brandy, pushing one across the table to his unwilling guest. He selected a cigar, bit off the tip, lit it and leaned back in his chair before speaking. When he did speak, his voice was smooth and even, though underneath it ran a certain vein of hard menace that Eugene Hilliard was only too quick to perceive.

"That would have been a sorry mistake on your part, my dear fellow, and I don't know but what I would have had the best part of the bargain, after all. I would have been out of my misery, while you would have by far the worst of yours to encounter."

Eugene Hilliard made no reply. He took the glass of brandy and drained it at a single motion. He did not even glance toward the cool villain who had him so desperately in his cunning toils, but Paul Vassall knew that he was listening intently enough.

"It's the simple truth I'm giving you, my dear boy. Though so deeply interested in the young and charming heiress, be sure I did not for an instant lose sight of her brother and his closest interests. Knowing how uncertain is life in this wild and woolly country, I made all my arrangements before coming on the stage as the Man With a Record. I even notified a certain Mrs. Eugene Hilliard to hold herself in readiness to pay her dutiful young husband a visit—go a little slow, you hot-headed fool!"

Sharp and vicious came the last words, and as though by magic Paul Vassall had his victim covered with a cocked revolver. And with a sullen snarl of baffled rage and hatred, Eugene Hilliard sunk back in his chair, relaxing his fierce grip on the hilt of his ready knife.

Paul Vassall laughed softly, laying the pistol down on the table before him, but leaving it cocked and ready for instant use when needed.

"Will you never learn wisdom, dear boy? One would think you had seen the folly of going off at half-cock, long ago! Then, as now, you were half-drunk; then, as now, you were playing against cool and steady nerves. You lost then, though you fancied you were the winner. You can only lose now when you pit yourself against me. You know this, boy!"

"I know this much, you devil!" and there was a savage light in the dark eyes that gave Paul Vassall a warning not to crowd his triumph too far or hard. "I know that if I lose, you shall never win through that loss. If I go down, you'll never rise on the ruins!"

"If that thought gives you pleasure, dear boy, far be it from me to deprive you of it," laughed Paul Vassall, as he carelessly flicked the white ashes from the glowing tip of his cigar. "Least of all do I want to quarrel with you at this particular stage of the game."

Eugene Hilliard laughed, his lips curling viciously.

"So a stranger would readily infer from your choice of words!"

"A stranger would hardly know what you and I know, lad," smiled the cool villain, with a mocking bow. "A stranger could not possibly guess what an intimate friend stands between us, ready to ward off any basty blow of knife or shot from pistol. But we know, eh?"

"Was it for this alone that you sent me that demand—"

"Request, my dear boy!" interposed Vassall, deprecatingly.

"That demand to come here without the loss of an hour?" sullenly persisted Eugene, completing his sentence after the original manner.

"Well, I may have had something of the sort in mind," was the deliberate response, as the villain gazed steadily across the table at the face of the young ranchero through the curling wreaths of smoke. "I don't deny that, dear boy. I knew your capricious nature. I knew that unless matters had gone a little more smoothly at Good Enough Ranch than they promised to do while I had an eye on the little comedy, you would come here ready to blow off your surplus steam on my devoted head. And so, with an eye to keeping you in proper subjection, I may have thought how I could bring into play the old trump card."

"Look out that it don't go back on you, you merciless hound!"

"Soft words will do more for you than hard, Eugene," and as he spoke thus Paul Vassall straightened up in his chair, his black eyes aglow. "I was never an angel. My temper has not improved much of late days. Don't call me out of my name too often, or I may forget myself and—bah!" with a short, hard laugh as he sunk back again, his lips curling with contempt. "I can put you to better use than to quarrel with you just now."

"You received my message, of course, since you are here. You came prepared, of course, to lend me the needed aid and assistance?"

Eugene Hilliard drew a note-book from his breast-pocket, extracted therefrom a few bills, tossing them on the table, saying:

"You asked for money, and there it is. Make the most of it. You will never finger another penny with my consent!"

Vassall picked up the bills, glanced over them, then laughed softly as he stowed them away in his breast-pocket.

"I'll make it answer, though you are growing something of a pinch-tight in your old age, Gene! Time was when you didn't begrudge a dollar or two to the fellow who so kindly led you to the gates of paradise, and then lent you a leg over the wall. But let that pass."

"You'd better!" snarled the young ranchero, viciously.

"For the present," coolly added Vassall, tak-

ing a devilish delight in playing with his victim, though at the same time fully realizing how dangerous that sport might well become should he for a moment relax his vigilance. "This is the pecuniary aid I spoke of; now as to the assistance."

"Don't count on too much, or you'll slip up on it."

"Not too much, but just enough," was the smiling retort. "You can guess for what I want you?"

"Guess nothing! Speak out plain, and I'll do the same."

"If that pleases you better, so be it. After all, why should two such intimate friends and fellow sinners wear a mask while alone together? We each know that the other is a rascal pure and simple. You know that when I choose to crack my whip, you have to dance. So—off with the mask, and get down to business!"

Paul Vassall tossed off the liquor which had until now stood untasted before him, throwing away his cigar and leaning on the table, one hand touching the butt of his cocked revolver. Eugene Hilliard smiled bitterly as he noticed this fact, but he said nothing.

"You have paid me the money I asked, old fellow—"

"And I wish each dollar weighed a ton—wish they were fastened to your neck, and you dropped into the ocean a thousand miles from land!" savagely cried the young ranchero, his hatred blazing out afresh.

"One mile would serve your ends just as well as a thousand, dear boy," laughed Paul Vassall, mockingly. "Instead, I am here, very far from suffocation. And now to business, as I had the honor of observing once before."

"If you fancied I had given up my plans because of the little comedy which transpired the other day at Good Enough Ranch, you have yet to discover my metal. Instead, I am all the more resolved to succeed in the undertaking, and I have sent for you to tell you just how you can best serve my interests."

"You count on my helping you again, then?" slowly asked Hilliard.

"Why not?" and the black eyebrows arched in surprise. "That was the agreement, I believe?"

"If I was a poor, weak fool then, I am something different now," the young ranchero said, his voice hard, his eyes glowing. "I'll help you to six feet of earth right willingly, but with my aid you'll never win more than that!"

"You forget—"

"I forget nothing, Paul Vassall!" was the impetuous interruption.

"I think you do, 'Gene. I think you forget what a devil I can become if the necessity arises. You forget how completely you are at my mercy. You forget what a thunderbolt I can fling into your camp—"

"It will be my word against yours, and who will hesitate to give me preference over a convicted impostor, liar, thief and scoundrel?"

"If my word was unbacked by proofs, perhaps you might succeed in lying out of the scrape, I grant you," was the deliberate retort. "But when I bring those proofs—bah!" and once again he flung out his hand with a gesture of contempt. "You dare not refuse me, Eugene Hilliard, and no one knows that better than yourself!"

There seemed to be a foundation of truth in what he said, for the hot resistance of the other seemed to suddenly yield. His head dropped and his clinched hands trembled visibly.

For a brief space there was silence, then Eugene spoke:

"What is it you expect of me, you merciless demon?"

"Not so very much more than what is right and proper, lad," was the careless reply. "Only to keep your part of the agreement. Only for you to give me a fair shake with the lovely and bewitching damsel who loves a Man With a Record. No more!"

"I'll have nothing more to do with the vile scheme. I've done far too much already!"

"Far too much for you to back out at this stage of the game—right you are, my dear fellow! There's only the one hole for you to get out at, and that points straight ahead on the same level I mark out for you. You've got to come to Limerick, or—suffer, *bad!*"

A hard, ugly laugh broke from the lips of the young ranchero.

"That threat has mighty little terror for me now, Paul Vassall! It shook me badly once, I'm free to admit. It made a cur and a coward out of me, but it can't do so again. Suffer? Any torments you could devise, devil from hell as you are! would be as naught in comparison with the sufferings I have undergone these past weeks! Death would be a blessing—and I'm not so sure that it won't come to that ere long!"

"Suffering perhaps, when looked at through lovesick eyes," laughed the villain, in no wise shaken or affected by the utter despair which filled the last words of his victim. "Keen enough now, but only fit to be laughed at when a few more years pass over your heads. Then, the adorable Miss—"

"Stop right where you are, Paul Vassall!" grated Eugene Hilliard, his eyes flashing, his

white teeth showing viciously. "Take her pure name on your vile lips, and I'll kill you!"

"Unless I kill you first, you should add, boy!" and the cool rascal moved one bent arm sufficiently to show his armed right hand, the dark muzzle fairly covering his adversary. "A touch of the finger, and you will be flitting through the night on your way to—what? I'll never tell you!"

Let one's despair and wretchedness be never so great, the sight of certain death is very apt to cause a shrinking and a pause. So it was now, and Eugene Hilliard sunk back in his chair, pale and speechless.

"I've met with idiots more than once in the course of my life, but you take the rag off the bush, Eugene Hilliard!" ejaculated Vassall, his voice filled with a mixture of scorn and anger. "I've got my foot on your throat, and you know it. I am your master, and when I crack my whip you've got to dance the jig I bid you. And since you know all this, why in the name of common sense can't you do it with a good grace? Why will you try to kick against the pricks?"

"Because there's a grain of manhood left in me, even yet!"

"A bit of lead will let it out if you keep on monkeying. I say you shall help me to carry out our original agreement or take the consequences. Which do you elect? Talk out sharp!"

"If you are not a bigger ass than you accuse me of being, you must know that Orabel would die before even passing the time of day with you, after the exposure of your trick that evening!"

"All the same, I mean to make her my wife."

"Your wife! She would sooner marry Lark Fuller, squint eyes and all!" sneered the young ranchero.

At the mention of that name, a sudden and awful alteration came over the face of Paul Vassall. It turned dark, convulsed with hatred the most intense. His black eyes changed color until they looked more like living coals of fire. And his voice was filled with savage hatred as he hissed:

"Ten million curses cover him from head to foot! I'll get even with the squint-eyed dog! I'll make him die a thousand deaths for each and every mocking word he poured into my ears when I could neither answer nor strike back! I'll kill him by inches!"

It was a risky thing to do, but Eugene Hilliard laughed aloud as he watched this sudden outburst. It was sweet revenge to him, and for the time being he felt that his own bitter humiliation was fully repaid by the torments which Paul Vassall was suffering.

"May you try it on at an early date, Paul!" he laughed, hardly.

The words seemed to bring Paul Vassall back to his senses. Like magic his rage vanished, outwardly at least, and there came a mocking, sneering devil into his eyes and his voice as he retorted:

"I expected something of the sort from you, dear lad, remembering as I do how sweetly the divine Mary used to smile on the crooked-eyed knight of the bull-whip! It must come hard to be successfully rivaled by one's hired man!"

"You lie in your throat, Paul Vassall!"

"And you lie while you accuse me of falsifying, Eugene Hilliard. And worse than that, you know you are lying when you utter the denial. Smooth your brows, my lad. I've got you covered, and I mean to make the most of my cards from this on. I'll kill you without winking if you cut up rusty. You know me!"

"Almost as well as Lark Fuller does!" muttered Eugene, not daring to carry out his first mad impulse, but still reckless enough to try to get even by wounding the vanity of his master.

"That shaft has lost its barb, Eugene," laughed Paul Vassall, with a sudden return of his old, careless insolence. "There is no cause for our quarreling over a man who is good as dead already."

"And a vast deal better, as I hope you will find out before you are many days older. Lark don't say much, but I know that he is on the lookout for your return. If you and he meet, there will be one less devil to curse this world!"

"Meaning me, of course? Well, don't bank too heavily on that contingency, my dear boy, or you may go broke before you fairly realize your peril. Lark Fuller is my meat, dead sure!"

"I'd dearly like to see the meeting!"

"So that you could slip in a shot from behind at the victor?" the other laughed, mockingly. "But this is not business. Once more, I want you to help me win the divine Orabel for my wife."

"If I could, I would not!" with a dogged resolution that brought a dark frown to the face of the desperado. "I came here to tell you as much, if, as I suspected, you retained a hope of carrying out the old game. I'll have no more to do with it!"

"Yes you will. You will do just as I bid you, or suffer the consequences, just as I outlined them at the send-off."

Eugene dropped his eyes, seemingly shaken again. It was a terrible power in which this demon in human shape held over him.

"What use?" he muttered, sulkily. "Orabel hates and loathes you!"

"So you say; but you sometimes make mistakes, my dear fellow."

"Not in this. For a time you exerted a peculiar sort of fascination over her, through her belief that you were the genuine Captain Crisp. But when the mask was torn from your face, the scales fell from her eyes most completely. I even doubt if she would listen to the Man With a Record, now, let alone *you!*"

"Your doubts have little to do with the matter," was the cold retort. "If I am ready to run the risk, you have no excuse for flinching. I say I will win, with your help, and—"

"Once for all, you've got to do without my aid in this!"

"You said as much before, but lacked the nerve to stick to it for more than a breath at a time. It will be the same as often as you are fool enough to make the attempt. I hold you under my thumb. If you were such an idiot, think what would be the consequences! At one word from my lips, she would put in an appearance to tell the divine Mary the story of the past, colored only as *her* lips could color each little event! She would take especial pains to show your last lady love what an honor you meant to confer on her, by—shall I say the word?"

He paused abruptly as Eugene Hilliard bowed his head upon the table with a low groan of despair. An unholy light filled his eyes, and now that his slave could no longer note the fact, Paul Vassall suffered the mask to fall from his face more completely than he had ever before since their acquaintance first began. In that face now showed a hatred fairly fiendish. It was that of a merciless demon gloating over the ruin of a victim, soul and body!

"Once for all, Eugene Hilliard, I put the case before you. Agree to lend me your aid in all I ask, or I will send for one to pay Good Enough Ranch a visit that will make you curse the very hour of your birth! You know whom I mean—your *lawful wife!*"

CHAPTER XV.

THE SLAVE BURSTS HIS SHACKLES.

PAUL VASSALL was cracking his whip right viciously, and from the wolfish gleam of his white teeth and the manner in which his dark eyes flashed with sneering triumph it was plain to see how much he counted on the effects of this last sentence. The effect was promptly exhibited, but proved far from being as conclusive as he expected.

Eugene Hilliard suddenly lifted his head, his black eyes staring the desperado full in the face. His own face was hard-set and desperate, but with something else that startled his enemy even before a word escaped his lips.

"You have used that threat once too often, Paul Vassall, and it has lost its sting for me. You were ever a liar, and I know you are lying now! Fool that I was to believe you even for a moment!"

"May I ask what all this amounts to, my dear fellow?" drawled Paul Vassall, his eyebrows arching.

"That you were lying when you came and swore to me that my wife was alive instead of dead and buried, long ago!"

"And that's your new-born hope, is it, Eugene?" with a low, mocking laugh as he leaned back in his chair and struck a match to light a fresh cigar.

"A conviction, rather," was the firmer retort. "You were ever a liar, even when the plain truth would serve your purposes equally as well. I know that you have been lying to me all along. My—she is not alive, but dead and buried, years ago!"

"It is you who are lying—lying to keep your poor, pitiful courage up to the sticking point!" and Paul Vassall daintily turned his head aside to avoid the fumes of the match, but with all his seeming carelessness, keeping a close watch on the actions of his victim, ready to foil the desperate action which he more than half anticipated. "Think it all over. Would I run any such risk as I have, if I hadn't a solid hold on you?"

"I have thought it all over, not once but ten thousand times since that accursed day when I stumbled across you here in town!" passionately cried the young ranchero. "Think! what else have I done but think—think, until my poor brain threatened to burst! until I only wonder my best friends haven't sent me to an asylum as insane!"

"Pity your vast amount of thinking has done you no more good than this, then," sneered Vassall. "Your thinking machine must have been miserably directed. You turned it in the wrong direction. Instead of keeping it to the main point at issue, you have been trying to evolve some method of beating the bank—of saving yourself at my expense."

"You poor fool! If your brain was fairly on its base, you wouldn't dare even dream of such a thing! Do you doubt? Shall I glance over the past for you?"

Little need of that, and the mocking demon knew this right well. Not a single item of that ugly past had Eugene Hilliard forgotten. And there was little exaggeration in his fierce almost despairing assertion that he had thought of nothing

ing else since the tempter came across him a week before the drama at Good Enough Ranch opened, with the attempted abduction of Orabel Hilliard.

A dark, troubled story, but one in which Eugene Hilliard had been more sinned against than sinning, at least up to the day when Paul Vassall accosted him and recalled the almost dead past to mind and memory.

It was during one of his brief vacations from business, that Eugene Hilliard made the acquaintance of Paul Vassall, who passed himself off as a gentleman of fortune, at first fancying that the handsome, dashing, well-dressed youth was flush with money, and anticipating a harvest well worth the trouble of cultivating his acquaintance. He soon discovered his error, but on learning that Eugene was a clerk in a large banking-house, other schemes took the place of the one he was forced to abandon.

Fortune seemed to favor him in this, for one day Eugene began raving to him of an incomparable beauty whom he had for the first time beheld on the beach. The hot-blooded youth seemed so wildly infatuated that, fearing he might lose control of his intended tool, Paul Vassall laughingly insisted on bearing him company to inspect the houri. What was his secret delight to find her an old acquaintance, masquerading as a rich young widow from Somewhere-or-other.

Paul whispered delightful news into the eager ear of his poor dupe as he drew him aside, and that night set about laying the wires by which he hoped to make an enormous stake without any great peril to himself. He called on the "widow," and she received him graciously enough. Why not?—since they had worked more than one crooked game in pleasant concert in the days gone by.

Then for a few brief weeks Eugene Hilliard was living in the seventh heaven of delight. The charming widow would give ear to none save the young bank clerk. And though, as the days passed on and rumors began to assume the shape of facts, many were the nods and winks of pitying amusement at his evident infatuation, Eugene was too wholly absorbed in his love to notice anything out of the way.

One evening there was a marriage ceremony performed at an out-of-the-way village, and Eugene Hilliard felt that the world was all too small for him, so insanely happy was he. For a short time. Then the scales fell from his eyes in one brief hour.

Through all this Paul Vassall had played a cunning part, pretending to advise his impetuous young friend not to commit himself too hastily, advising him to make all inquiries concerning the dashing young widow's property—he never breathed a word against her character!—before he went too deep. But he chose his words after a fashion that only urged the hot blood on the faster. And he it was who carried out the details of the hasty wedding.

Be sure he was not taking all this trouble for naught. For him the world contained and was made for but one person—Paul Vassall. And while secretly pushing Eugene Hilliard over the cliff to ruin, he was winning Imogene Tudor over to his deep scheme.

This was not difficult. They were a worthily-matched pair, one to the full as corrupt and evil as the other, though the hot, jealous temper of the woman had broken off the olden partnership between them. And what even Paul Vassall did not suspect until the harm was done, since that rupture she had taken to heavy drinking, though while playing her handsome, hot-headed lover, Imogene kept her head clear and wits about her. But that strain over, she gave way one day when Eugene ran over to Boston to secure an extension of his vacation in order to prolong the honeymoon which he found so delicious.

When he left he expected to be gone over night, and feeling the mad thirst upon her, Imogene set in for a solitary "drunk." That is the term she used herself, and hence it is used here.

She was at the wildest, maddest stage when Eugene unexpectedly returned. Even then he did not realize the whole terrible truth. He fancied it a nervous attack of hysteria, and sought to soothe her. Only to have his eyes opened to their fullest extent.

The woman was mad for the time being, but it was with a devilish insanity that left naught concealed. She told all. She swore that even while caressing him, with the bridal vows still warm upon her lips, she hated and loathed him for a poor, puling milksop.

She said much more, that cannot find record in these pages. She tore the veil from her wild, wicked life. She made him believe it all, though even then the poor wretch strove to think it only the wild, unfounded ravings of a temporarily unsettled brain. She made him see her as she was, utterly lost, wholly sinful, the child of shame, cradled in the hotbed of sin, in which she had become an adept before she entered her teens. And she avowed the plot which Paul Vassall had formed, telling Eugene how mercilessly the handsome gambler had cozened him from the very first.

Stunned, bewildered, sick at heart, Eugene

Hilliard reeled from her presence and fled, he knew not whither. He entered a train blindly. He never knew what occurred until he was dimly conscious of a mighty shock and a terrible crash. And when he recovered his senses, he was at home, in bed, pale and weak, but the shadow of his olden self.

Before he fully recovered, Eugene learned that all through his illness from hurts received in that railway collision, he had spoken not a coherent word. He found that his secret was safe, as yet, and he resolved to keep that secret as long as he could from his sister.

This proved to be easier than he thought possible, thanks to a meeting which he had with Paul Vassall shortly after. And the first words which the gambler uttered caused Eugene to unclinch his fists and postpone the revenge he meant to attempt for the vile trickery in which this polished villain had taken part.

Paul Vassall said that the body of Imogene had been fished from the water, and was then on exhibition at the morgue. He led Eugene there, and together they identified the corpse, though neither of them put in any claim just then. Afterward, feeling that he would never feel free until he knew the remains were placed deep in the ground, Eugene Hilliard sought out a trusty agent, whom he paid for claiming the body and effects found upon it. It was buried, and one dark night beside the new grave, he forever cast the past aside.

As he fondly believed!

Paul Vassall made no attempt to carry out the scheme he had devised. Perhaps he knew how completely Imogene had betrayed him, and felt that any such attempt could only fail, at the best. Perhaps he was secretly afraid that the hot-headed young clerk would try to pay him back in lead or steel for his vile duplicity.

Eugene was young, and soon recovered from the shock. He kept his secret carefully locked up in his own bosom, and no one save Paul Vassall and himself knew that he had ever married. So he believed until, years afterward, Paul Vassall met him in the very town where they now were, and stunned him with a devilish story.

His wife was alive, and ready to come down on him with her claims as a wife, unless—

It was a daring plan then outlined. Apparently Paul Vassall had spent much time and thought over this new token of genius. He seemed armed at every point, and had an answer ready for every objection his writhing victim could bring forward.

He knew the story of the genuine Captain Crisp, and of the romantic reverence which Orabel Hilliard felt for the Man With a Record. He knew that they had never met. He knew that there was but one person in the neighborhood who appeared to really know the mysterious hero by sight, even. That was Hurley Burr, and he was absent on a trip that would last for weeks, if not for months. Long enough for the cunning trickster to win his audacious game.

At first Eugene Hilliard fought hard and desperately against the chains which Paul Vassall was coiling about him, and even attempted to slay the villain, but the terrible shock he felt when assured that his wretched wife was still alive, so unmanned him that Paul Vassall not only disarmed him literally, but metaphorically as well.

He seemed to know everything. He knew how passionately Eugene had learned to love Mary Allen, and it was by swearing that he would bring Imogene to call upon her, to claim as her lawfully wedded husband the man who had been wooing her for a wife as a single man, by vowing that he would bring her to Good Enough Ranch in one of her reckless drunken fits, that he succeeded in bending the wretched man to his evil will.

This it was that made Eugene Hilliard act so strangely those few days before the first blow fell. This it was that made him so feverishly anxious to keep all employed at the ranch the afternoon when he knew Paul Vassall was to make his adroit bow on the scene. And this will explain his peculiar actions when Don Sancho Pedro brought the startling tidings from Rattlesnake Coulee.

It was nothing more than the truth with which Lark Fuller charged the detected impostor while forcing him to take that bitter rogue's march after his exposure by Hurly-burly. Knowing how romantic Orabel was, and how she revered the Man With a Record, Paul Vassall resolved to make his first appearance in character.

He hired Jim Farley and Sam Leffler, two men whom he had more than once employed in evil work, to abduct the maiden, and to halt where he could take them "by surprise." Of course it was only to be a mock rescue, and they faithfully played the parts assigned them. When Sam Leffler came in for the last time from his watching, it was to whisper to his mate that the boss was at hand. And though they knew right well from which quarter of the cover came the sound that had awakened such painful interest in the bosom of their fair captive, they purposely turned to the opposite quarter, never once doubting the perfect faith of their employer. Not until the fatal bullet

crashed through the brain of Sam Leffler, and then it was too late for Jim Farley to save himself or to avenge his betrayal, though he tried so hard.

Paul Vassall was not a man to throw away a single chance or to neglect the smallest precaution while playing such a bold game for heavy stakes. Using his power over the young ranchero without mercy, he made him furnish papers and documents, by careful study of which the audacious schemer perfected his knowledge of the past as connected with the Man With a Record and Morris Hilliard, and thus it came about that Orabel never felt a doubt as to the genuineness of her hero, even while, at times, she felt such a strong yet vague uneasiness while in his presence—the same that made her receive his ardent proposal of love so strangely while on the dark waters of Horse-foot Lagoon.

Since receiving that note commanding his coming, with money, to meet Paul Vassall, Eugene Hilliard had done much hard thinking, and when he confronted the man who had so bitterly wronged him in the past, it was with the firm resolve to defy his worst. The fact that as yet he had seen nothing of his wretched wife, led him to doubt the story which Paul Vassall told. He tried to convince himself that she was indeed dead, and almost succeeded. But when he met the schemer face to face, his haunting doubts returned, until he nearly yielded to the stronger will of that accomplished rascal. But now—he again doubts the existence of Imogene Hilliard.

All this flashed across his throbbing brain as he bowed his head before that hard, mocking speech from the lips of his enemy and master. It did not take long. The brain works with wondrous rapidity at times, and the past days of bitter torture had given his brain scant time to grow rusty.

Paul Vassall laughed as that head lifted, showing the pale, haggard face and dark-circled eyes.

"You are making a sad ass of yourself, my dear lad," he said, his voice full of a certain pitying contempt, not wholly assumed.

Utterly heartless and wholly without such a troublesome adjunct as a conscience himself, he could but poorly appreciate the tortures one may undergo who is differently constituted, and the vain struggles of the young ranchero gave him a poor opinion of his nerve and manhood. He believed him a physical as well as moral coward, and though he knew even a coward can be wrought up to a desperate outburst if crowded too mercilessly, he believed that the surest as well as the quickest way to suppress the threatened revolt in this instance was to show no mercy from the very start.

"Better that than the utter wretch you have made of me in the past!" flashed Eugene, with a touch of returning manhood that should have warned the desperado to go slow.

"Any worse than you were about to make of yourself when I came on the scene?" sneered Vassall. "You have one lawful wife living, yet you were trying your level best to win the heart and hand of a young lady, were begging her to wed you! What would she say if she knew all that I can tell her, if I choose?"

That was the bitterest point, and the young ranchero drooped his flashing eyes, a grain of intense wretchedness breaking from his livid lips. Only for that—only for Mary Allen!

"It would have been bad enough had you defied me from the first, Eugene," placidly resumed the matchless scoundrel; and mild though his tones were, each word was edged with gall and verjuice. "It would have been a disagreeable revelation to make, if only because it would bar the gates of this last paradise against you forever. But it would have been far easier and cleaner than now. You could have pleaded ignorance of the truth, then. But now? What would the demure, rightecus Mary say if she knew you had been making fierce love to her—had been begging her to make you eternally happy and blessed and all the rest—while you knew that your lawful wife was within arms-length, practically speaking? Certainly she would hardly fall upon your neck, and amid your mingled tears and sobs, call you true and honorable and white. Well, hardly!"

If he only knew it, Paul Vassall was surely wrecking his own hopes while satisfying the dislike he had ever entertained for the man before him. He was showing his merciless, devilish nature too plainly for the good of his wicked schemes. If he could be so merciless while seeking much needed aid, what would he be when that aid was no longer essential to his plans?

And there came a glimpse of two men shot down from behind, while faithfully serving this moral monster!

"She would hate and loathe me, I know, even better than you can tell me, you merciless demon!" grated Hilliard, his eyes glowing vividly as they firmly encountered that mocking gaze. "But even that would be better than to live on your worse than slave, as I have lived for the last few days! Do your worst! I defy you!"

This was far more like the genuine article, and Paul Vassall began to fear he had pressed too roughly on the raw sore. He needed the aid of

the young ranchero, and like magic he changed his front, his sneering voice growing more frank and conciliatory.

"But that is just what I don't want to do, my dear fellow, unless your pig-headed obstinacy forces me to take such harsh measures. Say that you will once more play the part I assign you, and we will bury the past so deep that it will never be resurrected until the crack of doom—if then! Give me your word, solidly?"

Eugene Hilliard shook his head doggedly.

"Never again blindly, after the way I have been deceived. Tell me just what your plans are, first. Then I will answer you."

"You know enough already for one who speaks with such a hang-dog look and tone, my boy," laughed Paul Vassall. "You know that I am playing to win your sister for my bride. You know that I have promised you to be satisfied with her alone; to give you her share in the property the hour she is safely sealed to me."

"And in so promising you show how much faith one can place in your most solemn oath!" cried Eugene, hotly. "You are incapable of understanding even the word love! Your god is gold, since through that you can secure all that your depraved nature craves! If I were to help you win her, my pure, innocent—Devil! I'll kill you if you dare so much as utter her name again!"

But even as he seemed on the point of hurling the table aside and leaping at the throat of his tormentor, he paused. Swift as thought Paul Vassall caught up his revolver and had him covered.

"Keep your seat, my dear fellow, and subside, or I'll send you to your last home in a holy minute!" he uttered, his voice low and even, but with a deadly earnestness that could not be mistaken.

Wretched as he undoubtedly was, Eugene Hilliard was not desperate enough to invite certain death while he had not the ghost of a chance to take his revenge at the same time.

"Don't crowd me so hard, you demon, or it will come to that, even yet!" he grated as he sunk back into his partially vacated chair.

"And you look a little out at the same time, lad," was the light retort as the muzzle lowered until it touched the table though the butt was still clasped closely and the forefinger touched the trigger. "I don't want to hurt you. The worst use you can put a man to is to snuff him out like a candle. I have further use for you and consequently will stand a good deal before taking the final step. Still, there is reason in all things, and if you ever hope to wear gray hairs, you want to be a little careful how you leap for the wool of a man like yours truly!"

Glibly his tongue ran, but a close observer might have seen he was far from being as entirely at ease as he would like to appear. There was a doggedness in the face of the young ranchero that warned him too late how unwise he had chosen his course. But he knew that any sudden or radical change at this stage of the game would be a still worse mistake, and he resumed:

"Enough of tomfoolery. Let's get down to business. I'll set the example, and if you are wise, you will lose no time in following my lead."

"Imogene is alive and hearty as she ever was since I first knew her. Never mind the story she told in explaining her long silence and vanishment. It would hardly please you to hear it, even at second-hand. From the glimpse she showed you that night, you can readily guess its drift."

"She wants money, and will have to have it, she wants sport, which she believed she could gain in great plenty by waiting until you committed bigamy, then dropping down at Good Enough Ranch in a drunk. That part of the programme, I will see is omitted, if you will pledge me your sacred word of honor to aid me in what I am about to demand."

Slowly, calmly Eugene Hilliard rose to his feet, smiling coldly as Paul Vassall hurriedly covered him with his weapon. And in low, strained tones he uttered:

"Spare your breath, you demon of all that is vile and evil. I will make no more promises, save to kill you like a cur if you ever dare to step foot on my land again."

"And Imogene? If I bring her to tell her interesting story to the divine Mary?" sneered the scowling villain.

"I'll kill her before she can utter a word! As for the wretched story of the still more wretched past, borrow no more trouble. I am going home to tell that of my own accord."

"You dare not!"

"I dare more than you have ever given me credit for, Paul Vassall. You have made life not worth the living. When I have made a clean breast of it, I am coming back to hunt you out, to kill you or to be killed instead. Does that look like a coward? And you with the drop?"

Surely it did not, and for one fleeting instant the life of the young ranchero trembled on a single hair. If he could have felt sure the explosion would not attract too speedy attention! But this fear checked the murderous thought, for the time being.

"It's not too late for us to come to an agree—"

"It is too late, you vile scoundrel! Even to win the woman I—bah!" and the young ranchero cut his words short. "I will not pollute her name by uttering it in your hearing!"

"You are terribly considerate, all of a sudden!"

"Because I am a man again," was the swift retort, and truly the young ranchero did look more like an honest man than he had since that stormy interview first began. "To prove it, I give you final warning."

"Lark Fuller is watching your movements, and if he catches you in any crooked business, you'll wish you had never been born! My cowboys are on guard, night and day, watching for you to come prowling about the premises, for they have orders to kill you as they would a mad wolf, at sight. If you are tired of living, try to pay Good Enough Ranch that threatened call of yours!"

"This is final! There are no hopes of our coming to a better understanding?" slowly asked Paul Vassall.

Eugene Hilliard made him no reply in words, placing the hat upon his head and striding to the door. Unlocking this, he flung it open and passed out without so much as a backward glance at the desperado. If he had, he would have seen a leveled revolver covering him.

But the weapon was not discharged. And as Paul Vassall rose up and closed the door, resuming his seat at the little table, his face was a disagreeable study. It was no longer that of a handsome man, but of a veritable fiend, fresh from hades!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RAID OF THE RUSTLERS.

"BOSTON! they's somethin' goin' on, sure's you're born!"

"Darn the odds, long's they ain't nawthin' goin' off! That's what we're put here to guard ag'in', ain't it, mister?"

Tam O'Shanter, thus dubbed from his unique and reckless manner of riding, made no reply in words, but craned his neck over the bars and sought to discover what it was that had caused the unwonted stir among the horses at that time of night when all was usually still and quiet.

Though it was no common thing for horse or stock thieves to make a raid in that quarter, such things had happened, and ever since Lark Fuller took the position of foreman on the Good Enough Ranch, there had been kept up a regular watch and ward over the valuable four-footed property. And ever since the going away of Paul Vassall in such bitter disgrace, this watch and ward had been more strict than ever.

Though turned out on their regular ranges each morning, every night the herds of horses were driven in and corraled. Guards were placed over each one of these wire-fence inclosures, relieved at stated hours, and were expected to make a circuit of the corral as often as the guards were changed, the old and new relief in company. By this means, if any mischief was done, the direct responsibility could readily be ascertained by the foreman.

There were two men on duty this night, and already they were anticipating the coming of the relief, when a disturbance suddenly broke out among the horses. Snorting, jumping up in haste from sleep, huddling together in a mass; all this betokened alarm of some sort.

Possibly an unusually hungry wolf, prowling about in quest of a square meal, had stolen inside the corral and made an effort to capture one of the colts. It would not be so strange. Wolves were by no means scarce, and the fence only consisted of three barb-wires stretched tightly between distant posts; the strongest possible fence for stock, but giving plenty of chances for small animals to creep through or beneath it.

"That's all right, pard," a little doggedly muttered Tam O'Shanter. "Mebbe they ain't nothin' out o' the way, but I'm goin' in to take a squint, anyhow. It don't cost nothin' but the trouble, an' time you know the ole man well's I do, you won't be so mighty fond o' takin' chances."

Boston laughed in his peculiar cracked voice, nodded his head toward the shapes coming clearer into the moonlight within the fence.

"Some o' the critters comin' to report, mister!" Two horses were indeed walking leisurely toward the wide, heavy gate through which alone could admittance be had to the corral without cutting the barb wires. Tam O'Shanter stared, for an instant suspecting he hardly knew what, only to laugh at the peculiar conceit of his partner as he saw by the clear moonlight that neither of the animals were mounted. Indeed, how could they be?

Tam began to feel that he was growing nervous, when—

Two horsemen appeared in place of two riderless animals, and with wild, savage yells, a blaze of flame leaped out toward the astounded guards! With an unearthly screech, Boston fell limp and lifeless, but Tam O'Shanter escaped untouched, though he felt the wind of the ragged bullet as it hissed close past his ear.

Those shots seemed the signal for pandemonium to break loose and vomit forth its hideously-uproarious fiends. Yells, hoots, laughs and howlings were mingled with pistol and rifle-shots. The horses snorted and neighed wildly, rushing madly about for a brief space, then dashing away in a direct line from the huge gate.

Tam O'Shanter saw and heard a portion of this, but that was all. He flung out his right hand and opened fire on the two horsemen who had charged the gate, believing they wished to carry it so as to have an opening through which the herd could be driven. He saw one of the rascals reel and fall from his horse, while the other wheeled and dashed away, yelling and hooting madly.

"Come on, Boston!" yelled the brave fellow, scaling the gate and leaping to the other side. "I've saved one critter, anyhow!"

To make sure of that one, Tam pounced upon the writhing figure bodily, for the instant forgetting all else. After all, it was just as well. He could not have averted what followed.

Between the frightened herd and the gate a dozen figures seemed to spring from the earth, creating the wildest uproar human lungs were capable of, and then, as the terrified creatures turned to flee, a single rider dashed away in front of them, uttering a peculiar call. And as there came the clear, musical jingle of a bell, the herd followed the rider without break or hesitation. Not even when the boundary was reached. Straight on rode the man astride the "bell mare." Straight on followed the herd, over the harmless fragments of barbed wire, on over the level prairie in a mad yet guided stampede!

These were the sounds that awoke Lark Fuller and sent him out of his bunk half-dressed but wholly armed. And before the echoes of the shots that had lain low at least two men died away, he was in the open air raising his voice as a point about which the bewildered cowboys were to rally.

Before his sharp, collected orders, that confusion was speedily turned into order. Within five minutes the cowboys knew just what sort of work lay before them, and were ready to begin it.

Without seeming to show partiality, Lark Fuller selected the best riders and hardest fighters to mount with the horses contained in the stables near the ranch. These had not been molested, possibly because the guards over the corral took the alarm before they could be disposed of.

"The rest git fer the other corral, an' pick a mount, then foller hot-foot!" were his only orders as he leaped into the saddle and sent his horse direct for the high board gate, over which he shot like a bird on the wing.

"Got one, boss!" yelled Tam O'Shanter, as he rolled swiftly over, just in time to escape being crushed beneath these iron-shod hoofs.

"Come on an' we'll git a heap more!" cried Lark, as he rushed over the corral in the wake of the stampede.

A single glance showed him how complete had been the work, how carefully the raiders had made their arrangements. Every wire was cut close to each and every post, thus leaving naught to turn or confuse the animals.

His strong jaws set firmly. He looked "a bad man" in the clear moonlight as he dashed at full speed on the track of the daring raiders. He cast never a glance behind him to ascertain how near he was being followed. He had eyes only for the figures in front, dimly seen through the rising cloud of dust cast on the air by the hundreds of heavily trampling hoofs. And as his good horse carried him still nearer the hindmost; as he saw them turning in their saddles to gaze back; as he caught the ugly glitter of firearms in the moonlight, he showed his teeth in a cold and deadly smile that spoke more plainly than if he had burst into a torrent of curses and threats.

The reins hung free on his good animal's neck. A muttered word was sufficient to cause the trained creature to drop into a long, level stride that gave but little shock to its skillful rider. And then the short, heavy magazine rifle rose to a level, and began spitting out fire and lead in deadly mouthfuls.

Here a rider, there a horse, plunged to the ground, death-stricken. Bullets came hurtling back, hissing past the bold rider, sending up the dust in tiny puffs, then speeding on with wild, weird wails that fascinate even while they chill the blood of one who hears them in deadly earnest. But Lark Fuller dashed straight on as though he bore a charmed life, even though he saw the hard-pressed raiders draw closer together, and then whirl as though to charge in return.

"Kill him! Ride him down and crush him to a pulp! It's that devil American!" came a high, shrill voice, and Lark Fuller laughed grimly as he caught the words, familiar to him as his own language, though uttered in a mongrel Spanish.

He emptied a saddle with the last shot in his magazine, and deftly dropped it into the slings provided for it at the pommel, drawing his revolvers instead. He felt his good horse give a spasmodic leap, and instinctively slipped his feet

from the huge stirrups, anticipating the end. It came almost instantly; but when the dying horse plunged forward on its head, Lark Fuller alighted on his feet and dropped down behind the quivering carcass, his face stern set, his crooked eyes glowing like coals of living fire, his fingers swiftly manipulating the triggers as the yelling rustlers dashed on to carry out the fierce orders of their chief.

Never a glance did he cast behind him in search of aid. The fire of battle was upon him in its full intensity, and he had thought only for his enemies and their death. Straight and sure, as though firing at an insensate target for sport and practice alone, Lark Fuller met that vicious charge.

The front of the rustlers seemed a sheet of fire. He could hear the lead as it pattered against the body of his horse. A bullet tore along one side of his face, seeming to blot out the vision of that eye. He felt another sting him in the shoulder, a third scorch his neck as those devilishly yelling riders thundered nearer. But he never flinched, never lost his nerve or steadiness of aim. And then, when the enemy were fairly upon him, when it seemed as though their horses must crush him to a bloody pulp the next moment, the first sound escaped his lips:

"You, Tiburon! The devil American greets you!"

One more shot—his last—and the dark figure addressed shot from the saddle, and the two bodies fell together in each other's arms.

Not to be crushed beneath those terrible hoofs, though! If their masters were not, their horses were scared, and snorted wildly as they shied to either side of the writhing heap. And then, as the cowboys came nearer, their rifles sending in lead fast and deadly, the rustlers wheeled and fled at full speed after the rapidly receding herd.

"Devil save his imps of the boss is down fer good!" almost howled faithful Tom Deakin, as he leaped from the saddle without taking time to draw rein. "I'll chase 'em to hell an' back, but what I'll—"

He couldn't complete the sentence. His voice choked and his eyes grew dim as he knelt beside those bodies. His sense of touch rather than his eyesight told him which one was Lark Fuller, and with a savage snarl he hurled the other aside.

"Fasten to it, lads—grip it tight, but keep what life they is in it fer pay ef the boss is rubbed out. Don't kill him! Death is too good fer the likes o' him!"

And then, through the mask of blood that covered face and form, Long Tom Deakin sought to learn if life lingered in the veins of the man whom they were growing to love more and more every day they served under him. A glad, quivering cry came through his lips as he felt the faint throbbing of a heart beneath his trembling touch.

"He's alive! He's wuth a million such truck as them!"

"Alive? Why not?" and Lark Fuller impatiently thrust the half-sobbing veteran away as he strove to rise unaided. "Follow the herd! Do your duty, and never mind me!"

He did arise, though the blood was flowing freely from four separate wounds, and his chest seemed caved in, so heavily had the chief of the rustlers fallen upon him, head-foremost. He gasped for breath as he spoke, but glanced around in search of the enemy.

He saw them in hasty retreat, yet covering the rear of the captured drove of horses, compact, still capable of making a desperate fight—still outnumbering the cowboys two to one and over. Something like a savage curse escaped his lips as he staggered toward the nearest horse and grasped the pommel as though to mount. But then he grew dizzy, all objects seemed to swim and dance before his fogged eyes, and only for the quick eyes of Long Tom Deakin he must have fallen in his tracks.

"It's nothing—drink—they'll get away!" he muttered as he was lowered to the ground and the cowboys gathered around him, forgetting all save his condition.

It was not so bad, an examination proved. The blow he had received from the head of his bitter enemy was the worst, so far as present inconvenience was concerned. And though he almost fiercely urged them to follow without thought for him, and a move was made until Long Tom Deakin hastily covered the wounds with plaster and bandages.

Then Lark Fuller rose to his feet, strengthened by the whisky he had so freely swallowed, and bent over the last man who had fallen before his deadly aim. The outlaw was dead, shot through the brain, and it is doubtful if ever he realized what the words were the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch had flung into his face.

"A bold devil, if ever there was one!" Lark muttered, as he rose erect. "You've hearn tell o' him: Tiburon Vandelez!"

"The heart-eater!"

Lark Fuller nodded grimly, as he mounted one of the horses, leaving the former rider to catch up one of those left behind by the rustlers.

"He knew me, and that's what made the

devils charge so desp'rit. I knew his voice, an' saved my last shot fer him. We kin han'le the gang heap easier now he ain't with 'em to show 'em how to fight!"

"Good—Lawd!" chuckled Long Tom Deakin, as they swept past the prostrate forms on the prairie, once more in chase of the marauders. "Ef the durned fools only measure each one o' us by the standard you giv' 'em, 'tain't much stomach they'll hev left fer fightin'—no, sir!"

Lark Fuller made no reply, though he must have heard and appreciated the rude compliment. He was watching the enemy, counting them up, trying to divine just what they proposed to do.

"Fight, rather than lose the valuable herd for which they had risked so much. That was plain enough, since the rustlers kept close to the heels of the stolen animals, a few of their number doing nothing but urge them on at break-neck speed, while the main force rode in a compact body, some hundreds of yards behind. If they meant flight alone, if they had been cowed or demoralized by the fall of their chief, they would prefer to scatter into small lots, knowing that the escape of the majority would thus be insured, while the remainder would have at least an equal chance of getting away.

"'Tain't all over yit, boys!" he muttered, in a hard tone, his powers returning with the emergency, though it still pained him to speak above a whisper. "They mean mischief, an' it won't be long a-comin', nuther!"

"So much the wuss fer them," laughed Long Tom Deakin, now fairly in his element. "Greasers, an' only two to one—'tain't more'n one mouthful fer the boys when they're hungry as they be now!"

"Not all Greasers, Tom. The head devil was one, but he knew that he wanted good fighting stock as well as cunnin' stealers, an' he picked up the best o' his gang this side the Grande."

"Sortin' with Greasers is enough to take the starch out o' the best o' men, an' so it comes to the same thing in the end, boss."

Lark Fuller said no more, just then. He could just distinguish the clump of timber near which he shot the bull that bade fair to put Tom Allen out of misery, and something in the movements of the rustlers warned him that mischief was afoot.

Close past the *motte* sped the frightened herd, still following blindly after the bell mare. After them thundered the main body of the rustlers, and quickly vanishing from sight of their pursuers a moment later, rounding the edge of the timber. And on dashed the cowboys for a few rods further, when Lark Fuller gave a sharp cry and drew rein.

"Snags ahead, or I'm 'way out! Go a little slower, lads, while Tom an' I see what she looks like. Tom, take the left, ride fur enough out to see ahind the timmer. Ef the critters is ridin' straight on, you'll soon sight 'em. Ef not—then they're layin' fur us onder kiver!"

There was no call for further words. The quick-witted cowboys instantly realized the possible trap, though they might not have thought of it soon enough to save themselves, only for Lark Fuller. If his suspicions were well founded it would almost certainly have insured their annihilation had they kept straight on in the trail.

Lark spurred rapidly at a sharp angle to the right, gazing keenly past the edge of the *motte*, a single glance showing him that Long Tom was imitating his movements, while the rest of the cowboys were advancing at a trot. And as his field of vision grew more and more extended, as he caught sight of the herd and then of the clear ground behind them, Lark grew more and more confident that his suspicions were true. It hardly needed the loud cry from Long Tom to confirm them.

In another minute he was with his men, hurriedly speaking:

"You know the trick, I reckon, lads. The imps is kivered in the *motte*, thinkin' to send one volley into us as we ride by, then out an' finish the bloody work afore we kin git our peepers fairly open!"

"They'd 'a' done it, too, only fer you, boss!" declared Long Tom, his honest face lit up with admiration, wholly free from envy.

"I was a little quicker on the trigger, that's all," laughed Lark, with the ready consideration for others which had no little to do with his popularity among his men. "But words take time, an' the herd is leavin' us heap behind. What is it? Shall we dodge around an' leave those imps ahind us, lookin' fu'st to the herd, or shall we charge right at 'em, hit or miss, break or bu'st?"

"What you say goes, boss," promptly uttered Long Tom, and the general ejaculations told how sure he expressed the sentiments of all.

"Then, we'll give the varmints a bit of a dare," laughed Lark, his cross-eyes glittering vividly. "We'll pass the timmer jest fur enough off to fool 'em ef they think to take a pot-shot. Ef they want to try a charge, I reckon we kin make it mighty interestin' fer 'em!"

There was nothing like bragging in his voice or manner. He simply uttered what he felt to be the truth, and then gave his horse free rein

again, riding so as to pass the *motte* at a couple of hundred yards' distance. Each man made sure his rifle was ready for hot work, then sped on without thought of personal fear. If they feared at all, it was that the enemy would slip off the moment they saw the halt, thinking their scheme was discovered and would be avoided.

"Eyes to the front!" muttered Lark Fuller as they dashed closer to the ambush. "Play you didn't know they was sech a thing as trickery in the world. Make 'em show tha'r hand fu'st, then you do jest as you see me doing in a holy hurry!"

On at a steady gallop they dashed, now almost abreast the timber with its base of dense underbrush. All there was dark and silent as death, but more than one of the cowboys chuckled grimly as they thought how chagrined the rustlers must feel while watching their intended victims slipping past them, too far off for anything like true shooting in the moonlight.

Still on, and the *motte* was past, measuring in a direct line, and Lark Fuller was beginning to veer his horse a little to the left, to place his men fairly between the herd and the main body of rustlers, when a rattling volley of fire-arms came from the ambushade, lighting up the timber with a line of red fire. Then, yelling like so many demons fresh loosed for a holiday, the marauders broke cover and charged furiously for their enemy, sending a hailstorm of bullets before them.

"String out so's to git elbow room, then down to kiver ahind your critters!" cried the deep, steady voice of Lark Fuller, as he set his men the example. "Shoot to kill. A hoss down is a man out o' the fight, fer a time, anyway!"

He was upon the ground and his magazine rifle was talking when the last sentence left his lips. And close with him the cowboys acted, their own bodies covered tolerably behind their animals, while the outlaws began to drop from saddle and to falter in their charge.

A sharp, clear yell, then the band divided, one moiety sweeping by on the left, the other on the right of the dismounted band. And firing as they rode, bending low on the further side of their animals, the marauders swept past, to draw together again before the cowboys could fairly regain their saddles.

"Take it cool, boys!" cried the clear, resolute voice of the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch. "Keep your linen on a bit longer!"

"We kin run 'em down, boss!" muttered Long Tom Deakin, a very demon of battle now that he had fairly tasted blood. "We kin ride 'em down an' not hafe try!"

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no, old fellow," laughed Lark, as he refilled his magazine. "You've got powder in your eyes so you can't count as straight as you would ef that was a bunch of steers you was buyin'."

"We're good fer bigger odds then them! Didn't we whip 'em jes' now?" persisted the veteran, hard to choke off as a bull-dog.

"Anyway we didn't get whipped, an' it'd be a mighty pity to spoil our record jest when all's goin' slick as anybody could ax. We hain't lost a man sence the brush begun, an' men count in a case like this. We will need all we've got afore the end comes, now you mark my word!"

"You're boss, an' what you say goes, in course, but—durned ef it don't seem jes' as easy!" grumbled Long Tom, licking his thin lips.

Lark Fuller made no immediate reply, but keenly watched the movements of the outlaws in advance, all the while leading his men at a steady pace in chase.

He saw other men drop around from where they had been riding on either flank of the herd, and a grim smile parted his lips as he saw this precaution. It told him the enemy was beginning to grow uneasy in sober earnest.

"Now I'll answer you, Long Tom," he said, quietly, as he turned in his saddle a little, though not slackening his pace. "We've thinned out the imps pritty smart, but they've got enough left to make it mighty sultry fer us ef we give 'em a chance. You kin see as much fer yourself. They're pickin' up thar men a'ready, an' you kin take oath they hev more still takin' keer of the herd."

"What I propose is this: We'll foller the imps so cluss to-night thet they won't hev no chance to set a trap fer us. When day comes, so we kin do reg'lar shootin', I'll thin 'em off some more, or else make 'em so hot they'll charge us on our own ground. When they do, be sure you'll hev all the fightin' you kin git away with. It ain't no fool that tuck charge o' that outfit since Tiburon fell out."

"You're right, boss, as I knowed you was all the time," frankly uttered Long Tom, grasping the extended hand and wringing it with honest vigor. "But it's so mighty long sence I've shet my ole fangs down on Greaser flesh, that it come mighty hard fer to let go my grip, even at your say-so!"

"No harm done, old fellow," laughed Lark Fuller, his gray eyes all aglow. "It's just such men I like to have at my shoulder when I go into a fight. Better to choke off than to lash on!"

For some minutes the chase continued without anything of moment occurring. Lark Fuller

had fully determined on his course, and felt fairly assured that he would not only be able to recover the stolen herd, but at the same time to read the rustlers a lesson such as their evil and dangerous craft would not be likely to soon forget.

It was with no particular uneasiness that he saw the main force of the marauders falling little by little to the rear of the herd. He expected as much, and in case the intervening distance should increase to a dangerous amount, he had his plans ready for counteracting the evil. He knew that if pressed a little closer, the enemy would prefer to give way a little more, rather than risk a pitched battle. That would come only if the cowboys should try to flank them in order to turn or recapture the herd.

The *motte* had not entirely been sunk behind them, when a sharp cry from one of the cowboys who had chanced to take a backward glance, startled Lark Fuller. He turned quickly, and a fierce, almost despairing curse burst from his lips as he realized the terrible truth.

Far away, yet in a quarter that could not possibly be mistaken, a red glow was rising against the sky, seeming to spread and grow even as they gazed. And as one man the cry came to the lips of all:

"It's the ranch—on fire!"

As though that united exclamation had reached the ears of the enemy, a wild, taunting yell came floating over the prairie, and they waved their weapons in savage exultation!

CHAPTER XVII.

PAUL VASSALL PLAYS HIS LAST CARD.

WHEN that frightful uproar broke out, all the inmates of Good Enough Ranch proper were in bed and sound asleep; but the storied Seven of Cologne might have been awakened by that confused conglomeration of sounds, slightly deadened though it was by some little distance and the closed condition of the building.

Eugene Hilliard heard it, and leaped out of bed, his first thought—for he had been dreaming of Paul Vassall and the black threats that conscienceless villain had pronounced—being that his liquor-crazed wife had effected an entrance and was tearing things wide open. But then he could distinguish the rattle of firearms and the wild yells of angry men, and something of the truth burst upon his confused brain.

It was a great relief to him, too, even though he knew much of his property was endangered. For now he could tell that the hollow, earthquake-like rumble was caused by the thunder of furiously stampeding hoofs.

He could hear the agitated cries of Orabel and the servants. He made out the asthmatic wailings of Aunty Marshall, and as he hurriedly leaped into his clothes and caught up a belt of arms, which he kept ever at his bedside, he shouted forth encouragement to the frightened women.

"Keep to your rooms, girls, and it'll all come out right!" he hurriedly uttered, as he passed by the chambers. "It is nothing but a stampede of the horses. Stay where you are until I come back to report more surely!"

Without a thought of what awaited him, Eugene Hilliard dashed to the front door, removing the fastenings and casting the barrier wide, crossing the threshold at a bound, only to throw up his arms and fall headlong, uttering a wild cry of agony!

Skulking close beside the doorway, hidden from view amid the shadows that were increased by the vines and flowering shrubs that ran up and over the latticed veranda, were three dark figures. And as Eugene Hilliard leaped out through the door, there came the pale flashing of steel from each side, and then the ugly sound of knives entering flesh!

"Look after the cur!" snarled one of the assassins, as the young ranchero fell and rolled off of the veranda. "He mustn't let out another howl like that! Bounce him!"

It was the voice of Paul Vassall, and the ruffians he commanded lost no time in putting his orders into execution. The moonlight saw another flashing of steel, now red and moist, then the ruffians came back to their master, one of them growling:

"It wasn't needed, but you said so, and that's enough!"

"There's another man inside—a fat, clumsy cuss, but just fool enough to bounce us for blood. You two look out for him, and I'll see to the girl!"

A swift glance around them showed nothing to fear from the outside. Lark Fuller and the pick of his men were already mounted and in hot pursuit of the rustlers, while the remainder of the cowboys were rushing headlong toward the other corral, where they could procure horses to join in the chase. In the excitement and uproar, the wild cry uttered by Eugene Hilliard as he fell beneath the knives of the assassins had passed unnoticed.

Laughing like a demon of evil as he reasoned thus, Paul Vassall, as his voice and figure proclaimed him, though he wore a disguise on face and body, rushed into the house and up the stairs, just as Orabel and Mary, half dressed, rushed out of their chambers, alarmed by the cry of the young ranchero.

Orabel, in the gloom, believing this shadowy figure was Eugene returning, hastened to meet him, broken questions escaping her lips, only to utter a frightened cry as the villain flung his strong arm about her, laughing viciously, hissing in her ear:

"Take it easy, lady-bird! Act sensible, for once in your life, or—"

She strove to tear herself free, uttering a choking cry for help, which was answered by an indignant ejaculation from Mary Allen, who forgot her natural timidity, forgot all save that her bosom friend was in peril. She darted forward and struck with all her strength at the black masked face of the ruffian, then sought to tear away his hold, only ceasing when Paul Vassall, with a vicious curse, dashed his clinched fist full into her face, hurling her senseless, death-like across the hall, to fall in a limp and lifeless heap almost at the feet of Aunty Marshall, who just then came on the scene with a lighted lamp.

"Down the old hag!" grated Paul Vassall as the worthy housekeeper gave vent to her terror in resounding screams. "Slit her throat if you can't stop her any other way!"

One of his ruffians hurled a revolver at the poor woman, striking her in the stomach, not only stilling her shrieks, but bringing her to the floor in a heap. The lamp was extinguished without exploding, and they were left in comparative darkness.

"That will do—they'll give no more trouble for a time," hurriedly muttered Vassall, keeping one hand clasped over the lips of his still struggling captive. "Guard me down-stairs. Watch for that fat fool, and take him in before he can make a row!"

Excited, exultant though he was at the perfect success which had attended his bold scheme thus far, Paul Vassall felt no little uneasiness as he hastened down the stairs and across the wide hall to the open door. He knew that Tom Allen had not left the building since the alarm was given, and he expected to receive a shot or a blow at any moment, for none knew better than he that Tom was no coward, let the odds against him be what they might.

He drew a long breath as he passed out into the moonlight, after a swift glance assured him that Eugene Hilliard still lay as he had fallen, and that nothing was to be seen of any cowboys. Bearing Orabel across one shoulder, limp and senseless, partly the effect of the sudden fright, partly from the fierce grip which the kidnapper had kept over her lips and nostrils to quiet her screams, Paul Vassall hurried away from the ranch until nearly a hundred yards off before halting.

"This little beauty is worth too much to run the chance of getting spoilt by a stray bullet, lads," he hurriedly muttered as his men came up. "You saw nothing of that infernal Tom Allen?"

"Jes' the one man, boss, an' he lays cold meat out yender," one of the ruffians promptly answered, nodding toward the spot where the young ranchero lay weltering in his own blood.

"Not him: a fat, awkward fellow. He must be somewhere about the place, for I know he didn't strike out with the cowboys!"

"We'll take 'nother look, if you say so, boss!"

"Do so. I would come with you, but I can't run any chances here. If you find the fellow, down him for good. We don't want spying on us when we make tracks. Off you go, and lively! I'll make over to where we left the animals, and wait for you there. Hasten!"

The two ruffians seemed well trained and willing enough to carry out the orders of their chief, for without a word of objection they drew their pistols and ran back to the ranch.

Paul Vassall picked up the unconscious maiden and bore her rapidly away over the prairie, heading for a certain point on the margin of the timber. He was not long delayed in reaching the point where their horses had been hidden, and pausing for a few moments on the verge of the cover, he glanced anxiously back toward the ranch.

The non-appearance of Tom Allen took him by surprise, and somehow rendered him strangely uneasy. He knew how sincerely the fat man loved the young heiress of Good Enough Ranch—sole heiress now, as he caught himself thinking!—and also knew that not a drop of coward blood flowed in the man's veins. Why, then, had he not come to the rescue when Orabel shrieked aloud for help? Could it be that he was cool and clear-witted enough to lie low for a more favorable opportunity? That he meant to watch and follow the kidnappers?

"Either that, or else the capricious beauty has driven him off in utter despair," muttered the kidnapper, uneasily. "And yet—Mary was there. She would never permit him to leave alone. Curse the luck! what keeps those infernal rascals so long?"

Not long, save in his own ruffled imagination. The two rascals were busy at work, losing very few moments in aimless movements. And as Paul Vassall soon after saw them coming toward him at a trot, he impatiently climbed into the saddle, bearing the figure of Orabel in his arm, ready to take up their flight without the loss of a moment more than was necessary.

"Did you find him?" hastily cried Vassall, as the men came up.

"Nary find," was the laconic reply. "Not a man 'round the shebang but young Hilliard, an' he don't count no more!"

"You are sure? He must be there!"

"Then he's too mighty small fer to find 'bout a bull sun to do the lookin' after him with, boss," doggedly responded the ruffian. "We ransacked the house from top to bottom. We found one ledly, the same you give a han' to when she tried to climb up your back. They was the ole fat woman, an' two smart chunks o' sarvant-gals. We give them a lug, jest fer luck, then tied 'em up so they wouldn't git free too soon. We couldn't find no fat n an, though we went so fur's to look through the stables fer him, too!"

"If he was thar, what good could he do the gal, boss?" muttered the less voluble rascal as he swung himself into the saddle. "They ain't a hoss left on the place as we could see."

"An' next to a plump gal, we've got noses fer hoss-flesh, boss!"

Paul Vassall dare not linger longer near the ranch, and after all, there was little to fear from Tom Allen, even should he attempt to follow after his lady love. On the prairie in that clear moonlight, he could not follow close enough to do any damage without being himself discovered, when it would be no difficult task to dispose of him for good and all. To follow the trail he meant to leave would do still less good.

"Keep a close watch behind, and if you see anything like a man in chase let me know on the instant," he muttered as he urged his doubly laden animal out from cover and sped away over the level ground.

It was almost a week since Paul Vassall parted from Eugene Hilliard, as detailed in a previous chapter. During that time he had been steadily at work, perfecting his plans, making everything smooth for his last desperate stroke to win his ends, and at the same time to take full vengeance on those who had witnessed his shameful humiliation.

He made a bargain with a noted border "rustler," a Mexican known as Tiburon Vandez, the heart-eater, from a horrible bit of revenge he once indulged himself in, but which need not be touched on in this connection. It cost the kidnapper a goodly sum of money, though the rustler was to have all the stock he could run off in addition.

Above all, Lark Fuller was to be slain. Readily enough, Tiburon agreed to this clause, concealing the fact that he himself had long ago taken a fearful oath to kill the "devil American."

With two men of the rustler gang, Paul Vassall was to watch his chance and carry off Orabel Hilliard, while the cowboys would naturally be busy with the horse-thieves. He was to make all haste away from the ranch with his prize, and hoped to be in safety long before the alarm could spread to the neighboring rancheros or pursuit be organized. And his brain was now busied with the minor details, which will come to the surface in good time.

The three kidnappers sped rapidly away over the plain, heading for the broken ground which bordered the Horse-foot Lagoon. This was natural enough, since a regularly traveled road ran around the upper edge of the ridge, leading to town, from which place any one of half a dozen routes could be taken, any one of which would surely carry them over the border.

Orabel came to her senses before long, and with a hard, menacing voice Paul Vassall warned her to act sensible, unless she wished worse to befall her. He slackened his speed long enough to wind a thick scarf over her face, blinding her eyes as well as preventing her from screaming out an alarm, then once more the kidnappers rode on at full speed, only drawing rein at the ford where the river was to be crossed.

"You know what you are to do, boys," hurriedly uttered Vassall as he passed his prize to one of them while he dismounted and surrendered his horse to the other. "Make clean work of it, then hunt for me where I told you. We want to be well out of this before the coming of the sun! You understand it all?"

"Like a book, boss!"

"Then pull out!"

Bearing Orabel in his arms, the villain entered the ford where the water was barely ankle-deep, the bottom being covered with fine stones which retained no trail. He carried Orabel down the edge until the water began to deepen, then taking care to leave no signs after the moisture should dry, walking only on the stones, he cautiously began to cross the broken ground, climbing up until he reached the level belt running along the ridge, to which allusion has been previously made.

He drew a long breath of relief when this point was reached, knowing that he had left no trail behind him by which mortal man could follow them. He sat down to rest, still watchfully holding his precious prize. He was risking far too much in this game to run any unnecessary chances.

"Now, my lady," he said, rising to his feet with renewed powers. "We have got about two miles of pretty fair ground to cover before

we stop to catch breath again. You can go on your own feet, or I'll carry you as I've done thus far, just as you elect."

"I will walk, if you please," faintly murmured the poor girl, as she cast a swift glance about her, the scarf falling from her eyes sufficiently for this.

She failed to recognize their exact location, though the nature of the ground could hardly be mistaken. They were near Horse-foot Lagoon.

She also caught sight of her captor, before Paul Vassall noticed that her eyes were at liberty, and an involuntary cry escaped her lips as she believed she recognized in him the vile impostor, the false Man With a Record. And acting on a sudden impulse, she caught at the sable mask that covered his face!

Paul Vassall uttered a savage oath as the covering came off in her hand, and for an instant his clinched fist was raised to dash into her face. But then, with a hard, reckless laugh he caught her hands, twisting them behind her back and binding them there with the scarf.

"What matter, pretty one?" he said, recklessly as he caught her by the arm and moved along the level belt. "I meant to reveal myself as soon as we reached a proper halting-place, but it is just as well. You can study over your situation while we are traveling, all the better for knowing into whose hands you have fallen."

The poor girl made no reply. This discovery stunned her for the time being, and she moved along under his guidance like one in some terrible nightmare.

Before he left to attend to his postponed business, Hurly-burly had told her all about the man whom he had torn the mask from, partly out of his own knowledge, but more that he learned from Lark Fuller, who seemed to have taken particular pains to trace the past record of the audacious impostor. And remembering all she had been told, bearing in mind what a terrible humiliation this villain had suffered in her presence, so soon after making her believe him a king among men, it is little marvel that she should dread and abhor Paul Vassall.

Like Orabel, Paul Vassall was too busy thinking to waste much breath in talking while urging her on to the point at which he had agreed to meet his two fellows. But when this point was finally gained and he came to a halt, his tongue ran on nimbly enough.

"Look about you, fair Orabel, and say if I have not shown exceedingly good taste in bringing you to this spot. See! down yonder lies Horse-foot Lagoon, where your eyes gave me your sweet confession, though maiden modesty enchain'd your tongue for the moment!"

Mechanically Orabel obeyed, so far as to glance in the direction indicated. She caught a glimpse of the dark waters, only relieved by a single narrow strip of moonlight. It was at a point further up the Lagoon, but not so far from the spot rendered memorable by the picnic.

They stood on a little ledge composed of rock, broken and ragged, with here and there a narrow cleft almost reaching down to the shelf on which they stood. Below them the descent was almost perpendicular for twenty feet, then sloping gradually down to the water.

"The alligators cut short my story then, Orabel, and events over which I had no control hindered me from completing it afterward, until now. You will forgive that seeming neglect, my queen?"

Orabel shivered and drew back from the gentle touch which he put upon her arm. Words could not have more plainly expressed the utter loathing which she felt for the speaker, and Paul Vassall was keen-eyed enough to realize this. A harsh laugh parted his lips, and his grasp tightened until a faint cry of pain escaped her lips. He forced her back until she sat down, and then releasing her, he dropped to the ground at her feet, his face looking hard and merciless in that dim light.

"If soft words won't go down, pretty girl, you can have them with the bark on; I'm not at all particular. Indeed, come to think of it, I'm in just the mood to show a bit of devilishness to-night."

"Why are you persecuting me? Why do you force yourself upon me in this shamefully unmanly manner?" Orabel said, with a desperate effort steadying her voice and meeting his burning gaze.

"Think of what happened back at Good Enough Ranch!" he said, his words coming hissing, full of intense passion. "Think of what I was forced to undergo before your eyes—the eyes of the only woman I could ever love! Think of that, and then perhaps you will wonder less at my lack of what you call manhood! Wasn't that sufficient to turn any man into a demon?"

Though he paused as though expecting a reply, none came. Orabel dared not answer just then. She could only say that he had brought it all upon himself by his own wrong-doing, and while he was in such a dangerous mood, she felt that silence would be far safer.

Paul Vassall seemed to read her thoughts, and he broke into a hard and ugly laugh.

"You won't lie, and you don't dare speak what you consider the truth, Orabel! Well, let it pass for the present. I mean to square the account before I turn toes up, and like a wise man I take the pleasantest portion of the draught first. I begin with you!"

"Let me go, and I will never—"

"When I let you go of my own free will, it will rain diamonds, Orabel," he laughed lightly, throwing off the savage fit without an effort as it seemed. "You are mine, by the looks your pretty eyes gave back to mine as I held you from those ugly jaws down in the Lagoon. Mine by the words you uttered when you returned to consciousness. Mine by all the rights of conquest, and none shall tear you from my loving arms!"

"You shiver, pretty one? And yet, I am warm enough. So will you be ere long—my love will warm you so—"

Desperately Orabel bent forward and struck him across the lips, cutting his mocking, insulting speech short. He caught her hand and kissed it, still laughing as he spoke again:

"So be it, Orabel. If you object to love-making, knowing that my rough but faithful fellows will be along shortly, perhaps soon enough to cut short the climax, why, I'll submit, and talk prose instead of poetry."

"Do you know what my plans are? Shall I tell you just what lies before your ladyship?"

There was no answer. The poor girl could not speak. She was so entirely in the power of this merciless villain. Against his powers, what would her poor strength avail? And smiling though he was, in that dim light Paul Vassall looked more demon than man!

"Eugene is dead. Lark Fuller and all his men are off in chase of my fellows, who have run off your best herd of horses. Only women are at the ranch—though, now I come to think of it, what have you done with your fat lover, Tom Allen?" he suddenly demanded, as though he hoped to learn the whole truth by taking her by surprise.

"Gone—he rode off last evening, without saying where."

"Lucky for once in his life," muttered the kidnapper. "I intended to send him across the big river, if I had found him. But, let him go!"

"Long before your hired hands can come back, if they ever do on their own legs, the trail will be too cold for them to follow, though they may possibly trace us as far as the ford. After that—they can take their choice of roads, any one of which will lead them to naught!"

"My fellows will cross the ford, then they will follow it down in the shallow water at the edge until they come to a depth sufficient for their purpose. They will strip their animals and cut their throats. They will open the brutes and remove the entrails, so that the carcasses will sink and never betray the truth by floating, even if the alligators do not find and dispose of them."

"This done, they will make all haste here, in a boat which we have provided for the purpose. In it you will be placed, and then taken to the lower end of the Lagoon. As you may know, a very little work will put the boat into the river again, when all will be clear sailing. And while the cowboys are hunting for you by land, the water will be carrying you forever beyond their reach. Forever, said I? Perhaps not! There may be a home-coming in the not distant future, if you are half as wise as you are lovely!"

"You will demand a ransom for me?" faltered Orabel, catching at this hope, vague and frail as she felt it to be.

Paul Vassall laughed mockingly.

"Take a portion when I can have the whole? Give you for gold, when I can keep both gold and your still more precious self? No, my pet! You are mine, and until you admit as much, be sure I'll never lose sight of you for a single minute, by night or by day. When you are lawfully wedded to me, then, if you like to do so, you can come back to Good Enough Ranch for a visit. But—"

His speech was cut short by a sharp, appealing cry from her lips. Her strained hearing had caught the scrambling sound of footsteps to one side, and impulsively she shrieked aloud for help!

Paul Vassall leaped to his feet with a fierce curse, but then uttered a mocking laugh as a signal came to his ears.

"All right, boys, come on!" he cried, and poor Orabel fell back with a sobbing moan as she recognized the two ruffians who had ridden with them from the ranch. Little hope for her there!

In short, terse sentences the ruffians made their report. They had effectually disposed of their horses, sinking the equipage in the deepest part of the river, where it would never tell tales. They had brought the boat around, and all was in readiness for their flight.

Paul Vassall thanked them, then turned to

Orabel, lifting rather than assisting her to her feet. In low tones he uttered:

"You are no fool, little girl, save when you get to dreaming about impossible heroes with still more absurd records. You can see how entirely you are in my power. Try and be wise. Try to reconcile yourself to the inevitable, and it will be all the better for you."

A wild, frail hope flashed upon that poor, half-distracted brain, and Orabel caught at it as a drowning man catches at a straw.

"Men—you are men! Save me from this monster, and I will load you down with gold! I will pay you all—"

Paul Vassall grasped her tightly, gripping her throat with savage force as he hissed viciously:

"You will play the fool? Then you may suffer as a fool! Those men are mine body and soul! And so are you, Orabel Hilliard! All Heaven and earth can't save you from me—"

"You lie! I can and will save her!" shouted a clear, cold voice, and a revolver began vomiting forth its deadly contents!

CHAPTER XVIII.

LARK STICKS TO HIS DUTY.

THOSE were bitter, black moments to all of the cowboys, but to Lark Fuller in particular.

Before them the valuable herd of horses, still in rapid flight, following the magical sound of the bell, urged on by the yelling, hooting marauders behind and on each flank. A little nearer the main force of the rustlers, now shouting and flourishing their weapons in fierce taunting.

Behind, the red glow that could only come from Good Enough Ranch or some of its out-buildings. The helpless women, left almost wholly undefended. And one of those the woman whom he, Lark Fuller, loved as only such a man can love!

At the first discovery, the cowboys had drawn rein, and now sat staring at the slowly rising, broadening glow. After the first wild outburst, not a sound nor a word escaped their lips. The crisis was too intense for idle speech or curses.

Lark Fuller was the first to break the silence which had fallen upon them, his voice hard and cold, clear and distinct:

"That fire comes from Good Enough Ranch, an' of course it's bin sot sence we rid away, or we'd 'a' seen somethin' of it afore now. What think we'd best do, lads?"

The cowboys interchanged swift glances. The yells of the exultant rustlers grew louder and more derisive, though they were simply holding their ground as though waiting to see what course the cowboys would pursue. Long Tom Deakin flashed a venomous glance in their direction, then spoke for himself and mates:

"It ain't fer us to say, boss. You be boss, an' what you say is best to be done, that we'll do, or bu'st somethin' tryin'!"

For one moment the foreman of Good Enough Ranch bowed his head and seemed fighting with himself. It was easy enough to divine which way his inclinations turned, and nearly if not all of the cowboys expected no less than to see him dash off on the back-trail at once. It was this belief that brought the dark, sullen look to the face of Long Tom Deakin, who longed to be at the throats of the "Greasers."

Only for a moment; then Lark Fuller looked up again, his lips firmly compressed, his gray eyes fairly ablaze, his voice cold and stern:

"If that fire raily comes from the ranch, it's so fur gone now that they wouldn't be nothin' but a heap o' ashes to mark the place by the time we could git back thar. The loss is thar to look after the ladies. Yender is the herd we hed in charge. Ef we lose them, 'bout tryin' our dead level best fer to git 'em back, we kin an' will be faulted by every man as ever speaks about this raid. Yender lays our duty, lads, an' I reckon duty comes fust!"

Lark Fuller nodded toward the still yelling marauders, and gripping his rifle hard, turning his back to the red glow, he charged straight for the enemy.

"Didn't I know it all the time?" yelled Tom Deakin, swinging his rifle above his head and giving one of his shrill imitations of the Apache charging cry. "Whooray fer our side, an' hyer goes fer Greaser ha'r ontel you cain't rest!"

Spit-spit! went the magazine rifles, sending their humming bits of lead across the intervening space as the cowboys charged, at the head racing Lark Fuller, the deadly light of fierce battle once more filling his crooked eyes.

For a brief space it seemed as though the rustlers, still nearly double the force opposed to them had resolved to trust all to a pitched battle with the cowboys, but then their natural tactics prevailed, and after a scattering volley which did little injury, they wheeled and beat a retreat, covering the rear and flanks of their stolen herd.

Lark Fuller quickly regained full control of his fierce passions, and so fast that he could only

close with the enemy by riding hard and fast, slackened his own pace as he motioned his men to hold in.

"Cool an' easy gits thar in heap better shape then hot an' hasty, lads," he said, with a grim laugh as they rather sulkily obeyed his signal. "They's another day comin', an' when the light gits clear enough fer fine sightin', I'll fetch them as is left o' the gang close enough to your tools, don't you fret!"

That night had taught the cowboys of Good Enough Ranch one lesson, however, and though there may have been dark frowns and secret impatience at these repeated chokings off, there were no open murmurs, much less any mutiny. They knew that Lark Fuller would be obeyed.

Many a backward glance was given as they rode on only a good rifle-shot to the rear of the rustlers, and before long a new hope came to the heart of Lark Fuller and his comrades. Surely the red light was lessening instead of being on the increase! They could not be deceiving themselves?

While he slowly counted a hundred, Lark forced himself to gaze straight ahead, then turned once more for a backward look. This time there was no mistake. The fire was dying out, the light lessening, and that at a rapid rate!

"Good enough fer our side, my gallant lads!" he cried, his face all aglow with grim delight. "Whatever was burnin' it wasn't the ranch itself, or by this time the sky'd be too bright to look at easy. You kin see that it's dyin' out."

"Durned ef it ain't, boss!" muttered Long Tom Deakin.

"If it was the ranch, the boss has put it out rightly, but I reckon it could be no wuss then the stables or sech—mebbe that old hay-pile. Anyway, we needn't borry trouble on that a'count no longer!"

Apparently the rustlers had made about the same discovery, for they rode on at the heels of their stolen herd in silence, only turning now and then to show their teeth by sending an occasional shot back at the little band following them so persistently. And with a dropping shot or two in answer, the night steadily wore away until a grayish light in the east came to render objects more distinct.

Lark Fuller saw that the cowboys were beginning to look toward him as though they were eager to see him begin his promised sharp-shooting, but he waited until after the sun was fairly above the horizon before making any decided move.

"You fellows git ready ef the critters try to make a sudden dash, when they can't stan' my sort o' ticklin' any longer," he said, quietly, as he completed his brief preparations. "When it does come, it'll be hotter'n puddin' an' not hafe so sweet an' tender eatin'!"

Touching his horse with the spur, Lark rode on a few rods in advance of the rest of the party, then drew rein and leveled his rifle. A marksman by instinct, rendered almost perfect by long and steady practice, his aim was brief. In an instant the weapon exploded, and as he sprung the lever to throw out the empty shell, Lark rode on again, looking keenly to note the result of his shot.

The bullet had not been wasted, and a wild yell of triumph went up from the lungs of the cowboys as they saw one of the marauders fling up his arms, to reel and tumble from the saddle, dead.

"It takes the boss—look at that, will ye?" ejaculated Long Tom Deakin, as another shot rung out, and a second rustler fell forward on his horse's neck, saved from falling only by the prompt assistance of a comrade. "Good—Lawd! ain't we hev'in' fun, though!"

"Stiddy, boys!" warningly cried Lark Fuller, as there came a sudden movement among the enemy. "They won't stan' much more stirrin' up, but all that start won't git within sure shootin' sech as they kin do!"

Even while he spoke his good gun was rapidly, surely lessening the available force opposed to the cowboys. No cause now for picking and choosing. Into those close ranks his lead could scarcely go astray, and a man dismounted was a man out of the fight should the enemy make a charge for revenge. So Lark knew, and a steady stream of fire poured out of his good rifle, until the magazine was fairly emptied. And then, as he drew rein and deftly dropped fresh cartridges into place for use, he watched the marauders as they wheeled and came dashing down upon their audacious enemy, shooting as they raced, and he cried out:

"Cool an' stiddy does it best, boys! Make every shot—"

It was not often that Lark Fuller soiled his lips with an oath, but one found birth on this occasion as he saw the enemy suddenly falter and break, almost before their charge was begun. And not only break, but wheel and huddle together for a moment like men suddenly smitten with terror that will soon degenerate into a panic!

For a single moment he was puzzled to account for this, but then as he caught the sound of shots beyond—as he saw the herd of stolen

animals pause and crowd together as if checked by some obstacle in front, a wild yell of fierce joy escaped his lips.

"Run ag'in' a snag, by all that's holy! Dig spurs an' give 'em all you know how, boys! Now's your chance!"

"An' we're the lads as'll make the most of it, too, you bet!" yelled Long Tom Deakin, shooting ahead of his mates, his rifle vomiting out death and wounds to more than one of the demoralized marauders.

With howls of blind terror, the horse-thieves broke and fled at top speed, each man caring only for himself. And after them raced the cowboys, shooting on the jump, each man singling out his prey and having eyes for naught else until a lucky shot brought down horse or rider. If the first, he dashed on until another bullet put an end to the rascal forever, then turned in quest of still another victim.

And not only the cowboys of Good Enough Ranch took part in that tragic scene. Other men, well armed and mounted, played a prominent part in the drama. And Lark Fuller gave a shrill yell of delight as he recognized the giant figure in the front, whose wildly floating hair, whose deep, lion-like roar could not be mistaken.

Hurly-burly to the rescue!

The affair was as brief as it was bloody, and when the two chiefs met, the victory was complete. A few of the marauders had effected an escape, and it was just as well. The story they would have to tell their fellows in the "stock trade," would work more good than even their deaths at that time.

Few words passed between the two men as their strong hands met each other. Time was by far too valuable to waste in idle talk. And as Long Tom Deakin came up in response to the signal yell of his idolized boss, Lark hastily spoke:

"You'll gether up the critters an' make the best o' your way back to the ranch, Tom. Let 'em take thar time, when you once git 'em headed right, fer they've hed a mighty tough time of it sence they left the corral! An' when you git 'em well in hand, you kin count off a few boys to keep 'em goin' straight, while you fetch on the rest after us."

All necessary was comprised in those words, and with Hurly-burly and two stout men keeping him company, Lark Fuller turned his face toward Good Enough Ranch, pressing his jaded horse as rapidly as he dared.

Explanations were in order as they rode along the back trail, and Hurly-burly explained how he came to put in such an opportune appearance.

He had started from his ranch very early that same morning with men to drive home a herd of cattle which he had recently purchased. Just at dawn of day they noticed the stolen herd of horses, and suspecting evil, lost no time in getting under cover in a swale directly in course of the animals.

As they came nearer, the sounds of rapid firing behind the herd confirmed their suspicions, and, a true stockman, Hurly-burly recognized horses in the drove that belonged to Good Enough Ranch. That was quite sufficient, especially as he saw a stranger riding the bell-mare, and waiting only until he could shoot this fellow dead the bold stockman charged, dividing his force and sweeping both flanks of the herd clear as they rode, came up just in time to help finish off the gang.

In return Lark Fuller told his story, mentioning the fire, though he felt much less anxiety on this score than did Hurly-burly. Perhaps the foreman had other thoughts to divide his anxiety.

Though they pressed on as rapidly as their jaded animals could carry them, it was past noon when they gained a swell from which a first glimpse could be obtained of Good Enough Ranch. And what a glad cheer rose from their lungs as they saw the ranch still standing, not even scorched by the fire which had destroyed the adjacent stables!

On with a spurt that tasked their good steeds to the utmost, they dashed, and then Lark Fuller shot ahead as he caught sight of a little light form running toward them. And when Hurly-burly came up, the foreman was holding Mary Allen in his arms, his face white and hard-set as he listened to her broken, barely coherent speech.

No need to give it in full here. A few lines can tell all that is necessary for the reader to know, for time and space both presses.

When Mary Allen recovered from that dastard blow, Orabel was far away from the ranch, and the two men detailed by Tiburon Vandez to bear Paul Vassall company, had done their vicious work right well.

Vandez knew that pursuit hot and savage would be made by the cowboys, and in hopes of drawing them off his heels, he had instructed these two men to watch their chance and kindle a fire where it would do the most good. They obeyed, setting fire both to the house and the stables, though they said nothing of this to Paul Vassall, and he never noticed the red reflection, thanks to the intervening timber after they once rounded the point where the river made its sweeping bend.

Mary staggered down-stairs, calling on her brother, on her friend, on Eugene Hilliard. She caught sight of the flames kindled in the kitchen first, and the terrible emergency lent her strength and nerve sufficient to put the fire out with the water that chanced to be handy.

While she was working, Aunty Marshall recovered sufficiently to crawl down-stairs, and set free the two servant maids. Between them they discovered Eugene Hilliard, sorely wounded but still alive.

The stables were on fire, and with the wind blowing directly toward the house, its destruction seemed inevitable. Eugene was dragging himself toward the windmill which supplied the ranch with water, hoping to attach the hose and thus avert the catastrophe. But he was too weak from his wounds, and fell back with a groan as the women rushed forth.

Then—it was Aunty Marshall who eloquently dwelt on this portion of the story—Mary Allen came forth and caught inspiration from the broken speech of the young ranchero. She it was who set the windmill in motion, who applied the hose to the high tank filled with water, and she it was who held the nozzle and fought the roaring flames as gallantly, as desperately as the bravest fireman in all the land!

And Eugene Hilliard, gasping, apparently at the very point of death as Lark Fuller examined the bandages which Aunty Marshall had placed on his hurts, declared that to Mary the ranch owed its existence.

Long before this Mary Allen had told Hurly-burly and Lark Fuller all she knew about the abduction of Orabel Hilliard, begging them to lose no time in seeking to rescue her.

The giant stockman was fairly beside himself with mingled rage, grief and a longing for vengeance on the dastardly abductors, but Lark Fuller intercepted him as he was rushing out to mount and away on the trail. Few men could have calmed the giant then, but the foreman of Good Enough Ranch was one of those few, and gradually Hurly-burly consented to listen to reason.

"The dirty whelps hev got a long start, an' it'll be longer ef you set off on broken-down critters like them," Lark gravely uttered, pointing to their horses, too tired to do aught save stand with drooping heads, just where their riders had leaped from the saddle.

"Think of her—think of poor little birdy in such hands!" the big stockman groaned, his huge frame trembling with intense emotion.

"I be thinkin' of her, an' that's why I say keep cool," was the grave response. "We can't do nothin' without fresh mounts. I've sent your lads over to the other corral to pick them out, ef any is left in. Ef not, they've got word to foler 'em up an' use the rope."

"I'll go, too! It's bitterer than death, this waitin' in idleness!"

"Thar's work enough right here, ef you'll only open your eyes an' listen to reason," sharply replied the foreman, still gripping the arm of the giant and restraining him. "The master is mighty bad off. He wants his hurts fixed up better than they be now, or we won't find him livin' when we come back with his sister. You kin do that, while I look out the trail an' see what is the surest way to set to work when the boys come back with the critters."

Shaken, agitated as he was, Hurley Burr could not deny the wisdom of this advice, and with the aid of Aunty Marshall, he attended to the wants of the young ranchero. He had received four ghastly wounds, any one of which seemed quite sufficient to let out a life, but after a careful and thorough examination, Hurley Burr, no mean surgeon, though he had never taken a diploma, declared that, with proper care, good nursing and freedom from anxiety, Eugene Hilliard stood an even chance against death. And before he left the bedside, he called Mary Allen to him, holding her little hands between his as he spoke:

"I leave him in your care, my dear. He needs a nurse at once tender and firm. You wouldn't be a woman if you weren't the first, and the work you've done this past night proves your claim to the last."

"I will do my best," was the quiet response. "Give me my instructions, and I will carry them out to the very letter."

Lark Fuller was not idle while this was going on. He satisfied himself that Mary Allen was correct in stating that but three men had been engaged in the outrage. He found their tracks at the point where their horses had been left under cover, and when the two men came back from the further corral, leading four good horses, he lost no time in making them ready for the road. A word to Aunty Marshall procured an abundance of cold provisions, which they could eat while in the saddle, and when Hurly-burly came out in answer to the call of Lark Fuller, he found everything in readiness for taking the trail.

"Heaven send you complete success!" brokenly cried Mary Allen.

"We'll do our level best, ma'am," quietly replied Lark Fuller, as he vaulted into the saddle and set off at a rapid pace.

CHAPTER XIX.

TOM COMES TO THE FRONT.

CRACK! crack!

In swift succession two revolver shots rung sharply out on the night air, and with groans of agony, the two ruffians who had borne Paul Vassall company in his dastardly work, fell to the ground, one of them rolling over the edge of the shelf and falling to the rocks below, there to have the faint remnant of life dashed out of his carcass.

And almost immediately after there came a scratching sound among the rocks which rose above the shelf, and a dark figure came tumbling down, alighting almost at the feet of the startled desperado, then falling in a heap as though crippled.

The voice, the figure, were both those of Tom Allen, and a joyous cry escaped the lips of Orabel Hilliard as she caught those bold words in response to the blasphemous speech which Paul Vassall uttered. It was Tom Allen who came crashing down, and it was Tom Allen's usual luck that made him alight on a loose stone. This gave way beneath his weight, and he fell heavily on his side, rolling over on his back as he attempted to save himself.

Paul Vassall recognized the voice, and as he saw Tom Allen alone leaping down to the rescue, the first benumbing dread—the fear that by some strange fatality Lark Fuller had once more come to foil his desperate schemes—fled as he pushed Orabel back behind him, flashing forth a vicious-looking blade as he leaped upon the prostrate figure, striking savagely at his heart!

"Die, you infernal fool!" he grated, clutching with deadly ferocity at the throat of the fat man. "Die, and—"

Tom saw his peril, and did all he could to frustrate it. He could not arise in time to defend himself, but as he felt the keen blade, he flung up his arms and desperately gripped the assassin, fairly grinding his teeth together as he cast all his powers into the effort—an effort that was rewarded with success.

"You die with me, curse you!" he grated, as, fast locked together, the two men rolled over and fell from the rock shelf, a shrill, frightened yell coming back from the lips of Paul Vassall as he felt himself falling—felt himself doomed, even in the moment of success!

Poor Orabel! She saw the venomous thrust of the knife—she saw that it sunk from view into the body of her brave defender—she saw them roll over the shelf, with that desperate cry from the lips of Tom Allen—and as she fancied it was his voice which sent up that horrible screech, her overtasked senses gave way, and she sunk down on the shelf, senseless!

How long this insensibility lasted, she never knew. It must have been for hours, however, for the moonlight had shifted entirely from the face of Horse-foot Lagoon, and now slanted in upon the shelf where she found herself lying, chilled, cramped, benumbed, still sick at heart and deathly faint.

For a times she fancied that she was under the influence of a nightmare—that she was sleeping, not awake. But then her eyes fell upon a ghastly sight—upon the dead outlaw, who lay with his pain-distorted face turned upward, the silver moonlight lending it a frightful spectacle indeed for one whose nerves had been so terribly tried, so sadly shaken.

With a gasping cry she shrunk still further back, unable to withdraw her gaze from the face of the corpse, until a low, unsteady voice from below seemed to float upward:

"Orabel! Say you—are alive—Orabel!"

The spell was broken, and with a glad cry Orabel crept to the edge of the shelf and looked down, to cry out again, this time in mingled joy and thankfulness. For there, lying near a dark and silent form, she distinguished poor Tom Allen, the moonlight shining upon his pale, blood-marked face!

"Tom! dear Tom! Thank Heaven you live!"

"Alive—but about all," came the faint, husky response, though even amid the hot tears which filled her eyes, Orabel could see a glad smile lighting up his face. "I'd come—up if I—"

He seemed too weak to complete even that brief sentence, and Orabel felt a cold, chilling fear driving the joy from her heart as she saw his head droop and his eyes close. He was dying—perhaps dead, even as she looked—and he had given his life in exchange for hers!

With a sobbing cry, she rose and ran along the shelf until she discovered a point where she could clamber down to the broken slope on which the poor fellow lay. It was difficult work at best, and the girl was so weak, so agitated that it was almost beyond her powers, but in a few minutes more she gained the side of Tom Allen, who feebly opened his eyes as he felt her trembling hands touch his.

"You are not dead, dear Tom!" she sobbed, in her great joy lifting his hand to her lips, then pressing it over her throbbing heart.

"Orabel, it's new life—see you safe!" came faintly from those pale lips, and in the glad contented look which came over his face, Tom Allen became transfigured in her eyes.

If never before, if never again, just then Ora-

bel felt that it was the handsomest, noblest face her eyes had ever gazed upon!

"How can I help you, dear Tom? What can I do?" she faltered, though she strove hard to control herself the better to lend him the aid he must need so sorely.

Poor girl! With all her high and romantic notions, she was so helpless when it came to an emergency like this.

"Your face—my best—medicine!" gasped the injured man, the bright smile upon his face, the faint pressure which his fingers gave hers, rendering his meaning perfectly clear.

And he was right. Though he had been cut deep with the knife in the hands of Paul Vassall, and had received serious injuries in the fall on the rocks when he so desperately gave his own life to insure the destruction of her bitter enemy, poor Tom suffered even worse since he recovered his consciousness.

He had called aloud on Orabel, but there came no answer. He tried to arise, only to discover that one leg was helpless, if not broken. He tried to drag himself over the rocks, to gain a point where he might scale the shelf to see what harm had befallen his loved one, but his powers were barely sufficient to carry him a few feet apart from the corpse of Paul Vassall which lay doubled up on its face, the long knife with which he had sought to kill Tom Allen, being buried to the hilt in his own vile heart!

Again and again had poor Tom called on Orabel to answer him, but as often only the echoes answered his faint and fainter voice, until he gave way with a bitter groan, feeling that she was dead, had been slain by Paul Vassall when rescue appeared imminent!

It was this horrible fear that had done him the most harm, and now that he knew Orabel was alive, unhurt, her enemies all disposed of, a delicious languor came over him, and he felt that he would ask no greater boon, no better medicine, than just to lie there and rest, feeling her hand in his, with her lovely face, tear-stained—with tears shed on his account!—before his eyes whenever he chose to open them.

And poor Orabel, knowing not what else to do, sat beside him and humored the sad fancies of what she felt was a dying man.

Steadily Tom regained his strength, and by the time the gray light of dawn began to pale the rays of the full moon, he was able to speak without his sentences being broken by painful gasps. And while Orabel sat beside him, his hand in hers, the poor fellow made a clean breast of it all, while telling her how he came to appear so opportunely on the scene.

It was a sad, pitiful tale, though Tom did his best to give it a grimly humorous turn, lest its telling should too deeply wound the woman he loved so wholly, so simply yet heroically.

It would be painful to give his words verbatim, and they can be greatly condensed, for it was a difficult confession to make. Besides this, Tom felt that as long as he kept on talking Orabel could not well leave him, as she had more than once proposed; to make the best of her way back to Good Enough Ranch in quest of the aid he so much needed.

"Time enough, little queen," he said, trying to laugh. "I'm getting back my strength wonderfully, just by looking at you. And you are all the better for the rest, too."

Little rest or comfort for her, though Orabel was far too kind-hearted and considerate and thankful to tell him so.

Ever since Orabel uttered that gay yet significant reply to Hurly-burly when he asked her what answer she would give the genuine Man With a Record when he came, Tom Allen suffered the torments of the damned. He felt that life without Orabel would be worse than death. And so, after one of her gentle but decided rebuffs, a desperate resolve took complete possession of him, and on the evening before the raid of the rustlers, he rode away from Good Enough Ranch, leaving behind him in his room a note for Mary, telling her that he was too great a coward to live on, knowing that not only was Orabel forever lost to him, but that he would have to see her wedded to another.

In fact, his double life—his gayety in company and his gloomy, bitter reflections when alone, when away from Orabel—had fairly unsettled his brain, and it was his firm intention to take his own life.

He rode to the picnic ground, then turned his horse loose, driving it away from him with words and blows, so that it might wander to a distance and not too speedily betray the spot which he had chosen to witness his suicide. Then he was firmly resolved to commit the deed, intending to throw himself into the Lagoon, hoping that the alligators would forever hide his remains.

But then, as he sat thinking, thinking! he gradually came back to his sober senses. It was harder to confess this than it was to speak of his murderous intentions, but Tom was equal to the task, and did not spare himself one atom, though he felt that he was forever degrading his manhood in the eyes of the woman whom he loved so madly.

He told how, at length, he resolved to give over his insane resolution, and return to the

ranch for the purpose of destroying the note. Then he would confess all to Mary, and leaving her behind to cover his unmanly retreat, go away to fight the fight over again until he could master his mad passions, or they wore him out body and mind.

He was making for the road which led around the upper end of the ridge, having failed to recover his horse, when he caught sight of Paul Vassall and Orabel. At first he did not even suspect the truth, though he felt that something was wrong, and feeling that perhaps fate had sent him away out of his misery without his staining his own conscience, he crept after the dark figures until he gained a position from whence he could see and hear, just as Orabel made that vain appeal to the two ruffians. Then—she knew the rest.

It was long after sunrise when Tom brought his confession to an end, and then he was doubly miserable. Part because he felt that Orabel must despise him for the miserable weakness he had shown, in first determining to kill himself, and then backing out; part because he knew he would have no further excuse for detaining her by his side when she once more spoke of going in quest of aid.

He thought it was pity alone that caused her to bend and press her warm lips to his brow, and with a miserable groan he closed his eyes and averted his face. Perhaps it was well that he did not see the deep flush that suffused her lovely face just then. It might have renewed that wild, hopeless dream!

Finally Orabel left him, having given him water brought from the Lagoon, and made him as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. She bade him wait patiently for her return with aid, then turned away and climbed up to the level belt, making her way as best she could back to the ford where she could enter upon a fair, easy road home.

But scarcely had she left the ford before a wild cry of thankfulness broke from her lips, for directly before her she saw four men on horseback—and a moment later she was sobbing on the broad bosom of Hurly-burly, who was half-laughing, half-crying, nearly smothering her with his mighty beard and fervent hugging! And Lark Fuller was watching them, his cross-eyes filled with a grave pleasure, his plain face lit up with the same smile that rendered his gray eyes almost beautiful. And behind him the two honest fellows gripped hands with each other, grinning and just as delighted as though they too had found a great treasure!

Lark it was who first recalled the twain back to earth, and then Orabel quickly told him how she had left poor Tom Allen lying helplessly awaiting her return. And when Hurly-burly suggested that she go on to the ranch under care of one of his men, what a charming flush of indignant remonstrance came into her beautiful face! And how pleased she looked when Lark Fuller alighted to place her in his own saddle, leading the way on foot!

She told Hurley Burr all that had transpired up to the time of their meeting, and a graver, soberer light filled his eyes as he listened, though Orabel was by far too greatly excited to notice this or to read its meaning aright if she had.

Possibly the big stockman was thinking that if many more such adventures were coming to pass, his loved Man With a Record had better be putting in an appearance if the last wishes of Morris Hilliard were ever to be fulfilled!

Long before they reached the spot where Tom Allen was lying in his misery, Orabel begged Lark Fuller to shout aloud to let him know help was on the way, and to cut short the suspense which must be wearing him so terribly. And the foreman of Good Enough Ranch obeyed his fair young mistress, sending out a clear halloo, that must have startled more than one huge alligator from its rest in Horse-foot Lagoon.

Then the toilsome journey was at an end, and with a sobbing cry of joy Orabel answered the cheery hail of Tom Allen, and she was the very first of them all to gain his side.

Tom smiled a little sheepishly as the men came up, and muttered:

"The same old sixpence, you see! Unlucky as usual!"

"In gittin' so bad hurt, perhaps, Mr. Allen," gravely replied Lark Fuller, "but mighty lucky in savin' the mistress from this carrion!"

He touched the corpse of Paul Vassall as he spoke, and then was almost hurled from his footing as Hurly-burly rushed forward, grasping the body by the heels, lifting it clear of the ground and with one tremendous effort, flinging it out into the dark waters!

"Bait for alligators! May the devil tell him I did it!" rumbled the giant, looking like an enraged Colossus.

Only for a single breath, then, kind, tender-fingered, thoughtful, he looked after the hurts of the fat young man. A broken leg, a knife-thrust and numerous bruises received in the fall where Paul Vassall had met his death; but nothing that time and care would not heal.

"And all that you shall have, my dear boy!" cried the giant. "Little birdy has told us all, and you've played the part of a man, sir! You have made a record your children will be proud to look up to, sir!"

CHAPTER XX.

BETTER THAN A RECORD.

LARK FULLER quietly entered the room, his face grave and composed, a strange light filling his gray eyes. Orabel looked up from where she was sitting beside Tom Allen, a little wonderingly. Hurly-burly coughed sonorously behind his hand, shifting uneasily on his seat.

"Miss Hilliard, may I ask you a question?" Slow, clear, quiet the tones, but somehow they gave Orabel a curious little shock, though she instantly replied:

"Certainly, Mr. Fuller. What can I do for you?"

"I love you. Will you be my wife?" In the same peculiar tone, so calm, so quiet, came these words, and the foreman of the Good Enough Ranch stood before Orabel, his hat in his hands, his crooked gray eyes fixed upon her flushing then paling countenance as she stared up at him in mute amazement.

Mary Allen silently rose from her seat, and was gliding from the room, when a sudden movement of Hurly-burly checked her, his strong hand arresting her progress and drawing her to a resting-place on his knee.

Tom Allen fairly started up in bed with an amazed cry, and this seemed to give Orabel a counter shock. One hand gently pressed him back, while she glanced over her shoulder, saying almost angrily:

"Are you crazy, Mr. Fuller?" "Not that I know of, ma'am," coolly replied this strange suitor. "Mebbe you didn't hear me just right. I axed you would you marry me?"

"No! a thousand times no!" sharply cried Orabel, and it is possible that a portion of her indignation was due to the close, trembling grasp which Tom Allen gave her hand as it touched his wounded bosom.

"Thank ye, ma'am," said Lark Fuller, meekly, walking over to the open hearth and kneeling down, drawing a flat paper from his bosom and striking a match.

Was he crazy? Had he suddenly gone mad? Surely these were not the words or actions of a sane man, much less of the usually reserved, modest foreman they all had known!

To the match he touched the paper, holding it until the quick blaze turned all to tinder. Then he arose and turned toward the astonished heiress, his voice clear and mellow, his words coming freely, utterly devoid of the uncouth pronunciation he had always affected since his employment as foreman of the Good Enough Ranch.

"Miss Orabel Hilliard, I have performed a sacred duty, have fulfilled as far as possible, the pledge exacted of me by one who is now dead. On his death-bed your father—heaven rest his noble soul!—begged me to one day seek you out and ask you to be my wife. I promised him. I have kept that pledge. If in doing so I have offended you, I humbly beg your forgiveness, and will take my departure at—"

"No, you won't, my hero!" impulsively cried Hurly-burly, leaping to his feet, still holding on to Mary Allen with one hand, while with the other he grasped Lark by the collar as though he was a policeman in the act of arresting a criminal. "No, ye won't! You've played the fool long enough, and now—come out of that ridiculous disguise! Come out in your true character—that of Willard B. Crisp, the Man With a Record!"

Orabel shrunk back until she half-reclined against the bed. And Tom Allen, despite his injuries, managed to pass one arm about her trembling form as he glared defiantly at the unmasked hero—at this mysterious "Man With a Record" who had so long and terribly haunted his dreams!

Unmasked, but only in name. Save in that respect, Lark Fuller was genuine. Short, heavily built, homely of face, with eyes that plainly sat askew—what a striking contrast to the glorious picture Orabel had painted in her day-dreams! How unlike the demi-god she had expected to behold! And with a low, sobbing cry, she covered her face with her hands, seemingly unconscious how tenderly Tom's embrace held her!

"Miss Hilliard," resumed that grave, quiet voice, "I owe you an explanation for my strange conduct, and I beg that you will have patience while I give it. Then, I will trouble you no longer.

"You know what a curious man your father was in some respects. You know how he and I became acquainted. You know that, as the days passed on, we became very near and dear friends, though he was so much my senior in years. But you cannot know how fondly he painted our future, nor how seriously I strove to make him see me just as I was, not as his partiality saw me. I knew that it would be impossible for a young lady of your education and tastes to love a man like me. I told him as much, time and again, but he argued me into silence, if not conviction. And then, there was something so strange, so romantic about the whole affair, that I gradually drifted into the same vein, and really began to dream of the future just as he saw it.

"Not for long, however. Your portrait came, and comparing it with what I saw in the glass,

the scales fell from my eyes forever. Then I fought with myself as best I could, until the end came. Mr. Burr has told you about the two wills, and how I finally took charge of the one which gave me one half of his wealth in case you should refuse to marry me when I asked you to become my wife."

Orabel uttered a little cry and started up, glancing from the ashes on the hearth back to the calm, smiling face of this strange man.

He bowed as though in answer to the query in her wide-open eyes.

"That is all that remains of the will, Miss Hilliard. Of course I never intended to profit by its contents, and only kept it this long in order to burn it before your eyes when your refusal had given me a perfect right to do so."

"I did not know—I thought that you were only—"

"A man, which is the proudest title I have any wish to bear," was the smiling reply as the bewildered maiden hesitated. "I came here as Lark Fuller, to make your acquaintance. I found you all and more than your father painted, but the longer I knew you, the surer I felt that my wild, fanciful dreams would never be realized. I knew that you could never learn to love a man of my homely face and crooked eyes. And—pray do not misconstrue my words, Miss Hilliard, I beg of you! I honor and respect you; I even love you, but it is the love such as a brother might feel for a sister much higher and better than himself."

Orabel covered her flushing face, but Captain Crisp resumed:

"I say that when I knew this I was glad. Because," and here for the first time his voice grew unsteady, his gray eyes involuntarily turning toward Mary, pale and agitated as she listened to this strange revelation, "because, while studying you, I was learning to love another with a love that now forms part of my very life!"

"And if the lady you honor with that love, my noble Man With a Record," cried Hurly-burly in his deepest, most awe-inspiring voice, "don't reward you by giving hers to you in return, I vow and declare that I'll never hug and kiss her again—as I do now!"

He lifted Mary from the floor, folding her in his mighty embrace, kissing her until the hot blood filled her face. And slipping from his hug, she fled hastily from the room.

"Willard, you sinner!" and Hurly-burly drew the other to him, gazing steadily, kindly, tenderly into those crooked gray eyes. "If you hadn't ought to be hung, drawn and quartered, then I wouldn't say so! To think of it! Asking one young lady to marry you, right before the very eyes of the girl you loved better than your own life! And if she don't love you back again, my boy, I'm an angel of light!"

He gave the Man With a Record one more hug, then pushed him to the door, saying in a portentous whisper:

"Run her down, my lad! Take her before she's got time to get up-and-down mad! Don't dilly-dally, and I'm betting my old head that we'll have a wedding yet!"

And did they?

Of course they did!

Captain Crisp did not find it so very hard to appease the wounded pride of Mary Allen, for Hurly-burly was right when he said that the love was mutual. But months passed before the Man With a Record was made wholly happy, for there could be no weddings in a house shadowed over by the wings of the dark angel.

It was months before Eugene Hilliard recovered from his terrible wounds, but when he did so, he was a better man than before those long days and weeks and even months during which Mary Allen, a veritable angel of mercy, sat beside him and so tenderly ministered to his wants.

And during those vigils, when it was still in doubt whether life or death would prove the victor, Eugene made a clean breast of his past sins, concealing nothing, and with tears in his eyes begging her forgiveness for his criminal weakness. The revelation shocked Mary deeply, as a matter of course, but it was easier to forgive when she knew that it was a mad, intense love for herself that led the young ranchero into such dark paths.

She forgave, and Eugene recovered. He never forgot his love for Mary, though he was one of the witnesses to her marriage, and his congratulations were as hearty if not as gay, as Hurly-burly himself.

He never married.

As soon as he was strong enough, he set out to discover whether or no Paul Vassall had lied to him when he declared that Imogene Tudor was still living, and the result of that search left him far more easy in mind and contented at heart than before. As he had believed on that night in town, Paul Vassall had lied. The body found at the morgue and identified as his reckless wife, was indeed hers.

"Orabel—pinch me, hard! I fear I am asleep and dreaming!"

"Is the dream so frightful, then, dear Tom?" "It is lovely—it is too near like heaven to be true!"

"It is true, Tom! It has been true all the time, I verily believe, though my silly eyes refused to open to the truth until that night, when you lay so deathlike—so—oh, Tom!"

"But think, Orabel! Think of my unlucky figure—fat and growing fatter! And you so fastidious—so partial to tall and slender and handsome knights! Think of poor me—if I only was poor!" with a dismal groan as he glanced down at his waist. "And the Man with a Record, Orabel! I'm too clumsy, too unlucky to ever gain a title like that!"

"You have something better and more to be cherished than a record, Tom—my best, warmest, purest love!"

And from the manner in which Tom Allen received this whisper, a most charming mixture of archness and bashfulness, we are strongly inclined to think that he believed Orabel told the truth!

THE END.

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